

From Afar by Kaitsy

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Summary: Joyce Byers, and Jim Hopper - Post-season two. Spoilers. Heavy reflection on the struggles, losses, and discoveries of the last year. She was an old flame, a lost love, but still was exciting, unpredictable, passionate. All Jim wanted to do was make her days a little easier, all he wanted was to be present. Joyce deserved it, if nothing else.

1. quiet

Their time together in the weeks since the events of the lab, and Joyce's descent into grief was...quiet. Even when her house was full of kids, or when they shared dinners, chattering and eating, and carrying on - Things between them were quiet.

Not that they weren't involved, not that they didn't join in the bubbling conversations around them, or that Joyce was entirely silent - Of course she wasn't. She had her two boys, she had El to watch over now, and she would always be hyper aware of every twitch, sound, and glance. She was too attentive for things to fall by the wayside. To the kids she may seem almost normal - Sad, but not withdrawn.

With Hop, though - They moved around each other. They spent time together, they came together at the end of the day, they cooked meals, shared smokes, normal things. They were aware of the bond the kids had now, and wouldn't take that away (especially Hopper - the more time El spent with harmless, but traumatized, Will, the less time with Mike the soulmate Wheeler).

They interacted as a group. There was a frenzied, energized rapport between the two families, excitedly building something so...substantial together.

But, when the kids weren't in the room...there wasn't much said.

They circled around each other. They were in one another's orbit, constantly drawn in, and almost magnetically attracted. They were not willing to give up these shared moments, or the routine, but there were also simply...no words. They shared brief eye contact across the table, or as they handed a smoke back and forth between them (sure not to let their fingertips brush, though neither of them would consider why).

It wasn't that it was awkward - Why would it be? Neither had laid anything out for which to make it awkward. The kids didn't even notice, likely wouldn't recall accurately if someone asked - Do Joyce and Jim talk to each other much? "Of course!", the kids might say, because how could two people spend that much time together, but

hardly exchange a word?

They wanted to spend time together - Otherwise, they wouldn't. But it was so consumingly quiet, that sometimes Joyce wondered how they would ever open up again. Maybe they wouldn't? The thought didn't startle her as much as it once might have.

It was...so odd, though, so unlike how their time in the last year had been. Even in the weeks leading up to Will's hospitalization at the lab, they had been close (too close, one Bob Newby had observed in passing, but would never vocalize).

Joyce saved Jim's goddamn life - Jumped down a hole to save him, and it was - The most, the most that it could be. It was a present, breathing thing between them. He was always looking at her like she was some angelic warrior.

She told Hop everything, whether he wanted to hear it, in the beginning, and he told her to tell him everything by the second time it all went to hell. Hop was the one with her at the appointments at the lab, the one offering advice on Will's condition. They were entwined in the battle, and how could they not be?

But, this time - When it was all over this time...something changed. Of course Joyce was grief-stricken, was in turmoil with her emotions - Will was free - hopefully, blessedly, free - but Bob was gone, and oh, was he ever. That - that was a big part of it.

She could not get away from that image, so ingrained in her mind, vivid and bright behind her eyelids when she closed her eyes. Bob...sweet, smart, gentle Bob...she couldn't allow herself to describe it, couldn't reconcile him with his fate.

That did not fade quickly - She could not escape the replay. It became a horrific, obsessive thought, so that even when she was almost calm for a moment, almost less stressed for even thirty seconds, it would flash violently in her mind. It knocked the breath out of her, left her wide-eyed, and blinded. She would be in tears before she even realised, gasping, and clutching at anything nearby. She would be far away, and trapped in that moment, until something drew her out. More than once, it was the cigarette scorching her fingers as it

burned up in her hand.

She had taken to wearing a rubber band on her wrist to snap herself out of these moments, not even particularly out of desperation. It was almost a natural defense mechanism against the torturous thoughts. It was just something she did one day, without much consideration. She would pluck it against her skin to try to pull out of it, to get some distance and perspective, when the heaviness of Bob's death threatened to topple her. Joyce was no stranger to anxiety, or panic attacks, at the best of times. She was fearful it would all pull her under.

The rubber band did not help after a couple of days - She became numb to the sting of it quite quickly, and sunk into memories, paralysed with fear, once again.

It only left the inside of her forearm tender, and lightly bruised.

Hopper, of course, noticed this, and it was one of the first times since the tragedy that he implored her for more information. What are you not telling me, Joyce? His words hung as vapour in the blue evening air.

Joyce finally, quietly, exasperated, told him about her botched attempt at coping. Hop took her hand, slid the elastic from around her wrist, and pocketed it. He stroked long, warm, calloused fingertips down her delicate skin, and the purple little bruises there. They were painless, and superficial, but were an ugly reminder of the internal pain she was struggling with, the memories she was trying to shed.

And it was not awkward - It was comfort, it was support, and it was quiet.

His touch was soft, reverent in a way, and she found tears in her eyes unrelated to Bob's death. Hopper was here, thank God, and he let her sniffle and cry - quietly - his thick brow pinched in - quiet - concern.

Hopper kissed the thin skin on the inside of her wrist, then the back of her hand, and finally clasped her palm between both of his large hands. He rested them together on his knee, and his gaze stretched

out across her dark yard. He wasn't going to let her self-destruct, this gesture seemed to tell her. He, King of self-destruction, she mused.

Joyce felt undisturbed by demodogs snarling in her head for the entire time they sat there on the porch on the cold, bleak, December afternoon.

This moment with Jim triggered not an entirely new stage in her mourning.

Guilt.

Because - and Joyce knew it, and wondered if Hopper knew it (he didn't) - her relationship with Bob...even if he had survived, even if he had come home at the end of it all, and his warm body was next to her in bed, and he whispered about Maine again, joking that this series of events must please have convinced her to come...

She wouldn't have - Her relationship with Bob was not going to last.

How fucking utterly terrible that was to think about a dead man. But that was the thing - Even though he was gone, it didn't change her certainty on the fact.

She knew before, she knew when he asked about Maine the first time - How dear and unyielding was his kindness, but...she couldn't go, they wouldn't go. They wouldn't last.

(Joyce didn't love him.) Not exactly, not honestly, not like he deserved, though this was a thought buried at the back of her mind. It seemed too cruel to think. It was a low whisper in the buzz of her anxious thoughts.

Joyce felt like she was trying to catch up with his wholeness. It didn't matter how good she felt, or how often, because it wasn't always. There were days that she hid from him - This...darkness, the occurrence in the Upside Down, and how it affected her, how it affected all of them.

Bob only knew that, on these darker days, Joyce did not talk to him much. A couple of times, he had swung by the store when she told

him she couldn't have lunch, to find her smoking and drinking coffee with Jim.

When they saved Jim, cut him from the evil roots that the Upside Down had birthed, Bob couldn't look directly at the two of them. He couldn't look at the way Jim grasped at her arms, or the way Joyce held Jim's face between both of her hands, as if they were the only two people in the world.

Jim said her name like a benediction, and good-natured Bob wasn't about to call bullshit on the whole damn thing.

He didn't...question it, but these were times in which Joyce inadvertently made her choice.

Even though she did eventually share with Bob, even though he learned about it all, that night at the lab...she would never feel like she could give him her all when she was so splintered, so jagged.

She didn't want to bear the burden of hurting Bob when he realised he couldn't fix everything, and she couldn't fumble through, pretending that it was fixed. There was an ever-present wall between them during the few months of their relationship.

A lot of walls came down, this was true. For how refreshing was it to date a sober, warm, genial man, with kind, hopeful eyes, who held her hand, drove her son to school, and wore costumes at Halloween, dancing with her in the living room of a house that had seen so much toxicity (from her ex-husband, and other dimensions).

How entirely harmless was he, how good - Especially after years of Lonnie fucking Byers, who she would resent forevermore for stealing her away from herself, from the world.

But, was there not some (half-way) happy medium between Lonnie, and Bob? Was there not someone, somewhere, who she could be entirely genuine with? Someone who she could be broken in front of, and know they would understand, and not run, spooked, from it, either?

I mean, Joyce thought, of course there is someone. You know there

is, and that's why you feel so guilty.

That's why she could barely look at Jim, let alone share all this...share all these thoughts. It was...so painfully, glaringly, fucking obvious, that Joyce thought they should both be embarrassed.

How predictable, how typical, and yet, at the same time, she had no idea how she ended up here ("here" the last year of her life was, well, beside Hopper...even when she was also beside Bob).

Bob was gone...her concerns about disappointing him, about being unable to be truly open with him were unnecessary, because he was gone. Joyce was broken, lost, and so very guilty.

So, her time together with Jim had, indeed, been quiet.

2. not the only one

Christmas sped past them uneventfully, but happily. At least, as close to happy as Joyce could get, happy for the sake of her sons, happy despite the aching loss of Bob, happy for El's first Christmas with them. That was all Joyce could ask for at this point - Nothing notable was notable, just for the normalcy.

She was not sure what there was to expect in the months after...everything. Was Will really, truly released? She was so...so fearful, but so weary. Could they survive another round like that one? They kept regular contact with Doctor Owens, and he was of the same mindset - No news was good news, but they wouldn't take their eye off Will just yet.

By the time New Year's arrived, and it had been over two months since the occurrences...the trauma...Will was starting to feel social again. Slightly, tentatively. He didn't want his Mom waiting for him outside of the arcade, didn't want her staying to chat with Karen just to keep an eye on him at the Wheelers. He didn't get his way just yet, she still waited, and still chatted, but she knew she couldn't always be there.

And Will wanted to celebrate New Year's. With his friends. Joyce blanched when he brought it up. She felt she needed a couple more years with him safely at home, tucked away under her anxious wing. In the disturbing, intrusive thoughts around Bob's death, so too were the ones of Will...tied up in their shed, Will possessed and writhing, they sweating and burning, Will choking -

Some days were so long for Joyce, so full of these worries, these invasive, horrific recollections. She shouldn't be back to work yet, Flo had expressed concern to Hopper one day, as Joyce had arrived at the station, and didn't even really know why.

Joyce was still tired from it all, still desperate for rest, and recharge, and peace.

She knew that wasn't fair to Will. She knew it would be good for him to get out, spend time with his friends (he had such good ones, truly).

And Joyce would just have to accept her nerves would never be calm, she would never be rid of her anxiety - She was always one bad phone call, and an empty pack of cigarettes, away from a panic attack. Part of it was just her nature, part of it was called being a Mom.

No, these things weren't Will's fault, nor Jonathan's, and so after an evening to think it over, Joyce gave Will permission to spend New Year's with his friends.

This was excellent news for the kids. They wanted to spend it at the Wheelers', but also wanted El to attend. Even though Ted and Karen would not be home, the kids knew this was not something the Chief of Police would allow. What if Nancy had friends going in and out, and someone saw El who shouldn't? Who should the Chief even be wary of these days? He didn't know - He did not know. Instead he was wary of everyone, and was following doctor orders - Keep their heads down for another year.

The alternative was to convince the Chief to let them have their New Year's soiree at the little cabin in the woods. When they brought it up to him, all Hopper could imagine was a snow storm rolling through, and he would get snowed in with six teenagers. A god damn nightmare if ever there were.

They chose Will, for whom Hopper had the softest of spots after everything he had gone through, to ask the Chief. He was the only one the Chief would not say no to, outright.

The only way he would even begin to consider it was, well, if Joyce came, too. That then began the argument about how they wanted to get away from their parents, that Will didn't want his Mom hanging around, the "why do you have to stay?" "You know exactly why I have to!" conversations with El.

It was to discuss those kids, all of them, and these very pertinent party plans, that had Hopper tracking Joyce down in those odd, muddled days between Christmas and New Year's. Though, in all fairness, all of Joyce's days since her boyfriend was killed, her son possessed, and El walked back into their lives were odd, and muddled.

"Jesus Christ," was Hop's greeting as Joyce rang him up after lunch one of the days.

She had not seen him in the stark light of afternoon in some time. These winter months were so dark, not that Joyce minded. Any time they spent together lately was in the cloak of evening, or her dimly lit kitchen, other places, and times, they could hide among the shadows.

It felt like they'd been hiding among the shadows ever since Will was lost in the Upside Down. Their whole dynamic bathed in shadows (and had been for twenty-some odd years, if they were being honest).

Joyce could not avoid his gaze so well in the brightly lit store, with the afternoon light gleaming off the fresh snow, and coming in the windows. She could not pretend she did not notice he had the same dark circles as she, that it looked like he slept in his uniform.

She felt like she had to squint against it, against him, did not want to see him in such detail. She felt bare before him, felt exposed and raw, and sensed he felt the same, and everything between them was too much (had always been too much).

"Mike Wheeler is one persistent kid. He's after El every day to find out if I've decided on the party. That damn radio."

Joyce just smiled small, eyes focused on the till. Hopper didn't elaborate, though he did not look away from her during the entire transaction.

"They're all just...real happy she's okay, Hop. Me, too." Was all Joyce said, in between telling him his total, and thanking him for shopping at Melvald's.

Her voice was - quiet, as it had been in the weeks since, and she knew he noticed.

His voice was always deep, commanding, and warming.

Maybe now it was awkward. Now that it seemed like Hopper hoped that enough time had passed for her to at least be comfortable with speaking to him again. Now that he needed her help with the kids,

and wanted her involvement - Joyce could tell he was trying to ease them back in to how things were. Was he impatient with her, with her mourning (guilt, fear, uncertainty)?

She just didn't feel like she owed anyone an explanation yet, so she stayed in her head. She hated to appear meek, but quietness preserved her energy more than ferocity. Jesus, couldn't Hop figure this one out for himself?

Apparently not, Joyce thought as she arrived home later that same day. His police Blazer was in her yard. It was barely 4 P.M. - No one was home - Will at the Wheelers', and Jonathan at work.

She found herself braced for the impending conversation, which was unusual - Everything between her and Hop came so naturally (it always had), and conversation was never their problem. They both talked, they both listened, they fell into old, easy ways, and she - She never dreaded talking to Hop, never wanted to hear, or see, less from him.

Things were just so fucked up since the lab. She was so goddamn tender from it all.

He was standing by the vehicle with one hand dug deep into his big jacket pocket, and the other stubbing out a cigarette against his boot.

Joyce's door creaked as she got out, a protest to the cold. She reached into the backseat for the bag of groceries, not yet meeting his eyes, or acknowledging his presence. The day was already getting dark, the shadows growing long on the snowy ground.

With the brown bag propped against her hip, she adjusted her knit hat over her ears with one hand, approaching him, a squinty frown at her eyes.

"How - Why are you here before I am?"

"I knew when you were off." He said in that way he had, like he was innocently condescending, purposely flippant - Whatever, she didn't know. She didn't have time to figure it out, not today.

"Right, but why, again?" She said, failing to keep the annoyance out of her tone.

Joyce was rarely...impatient with Hop. It was the other way around, at times. They had been on the same side since she convinced him of the conspiracy over Will's disappearance. They butted heads now and then, but never over trivial things. The way he spoke never irritated her, nor did him showing up at her door unannounced - No, in fact, these were welcome, pleasant things. Almost everything he did was welcome, and pleasant.

Maybe that's why she was irritated.

And, in the time since Bob, since Will's actual exorcism, everything was just...rubbing against her the wrong way. She wanted to crawl out of her own skin at times, desperate to find peace of mind. She was so tense, she felt it to her toes.

"Just wanted to touch base." He said, as he stuffed his other hand into his pocket, his boot kicking at the snow, at which he was looking down.

Joyce catapulted back to high school at the image. She knew this Hop, she could perceive the struggle to contain his arrogance, the casual air about him was covering up whatever he was really here for, whatever he really wanted to say.

It was so odd, sometimes, these versions of Jim Hopper she met with. Did she bring out this teenaged side to him? She wondered.

"Jesus, Hop, you were here days ago at Christmas," She stressed, as if to say y'know that big holiday?

Her eyes were wide; expressive, deep brown orbs by which Jim Hopper had...had always been taken. Her bangs moved when she blinked, stuck to her eyelashes, hiding part of her gaze.

"You don't have to check up on me." She continued, when he didn't offer any further explanation.

"You don't have to tell me that. That's not what I'm doing." He shrugged, as if this was any other day.

His nose was red with the cold, small icicles clung to his beard below his mouth. Where were his gloves, where was his scarf, why did she have to worry about him, too?

They worried about each other.

As Joyce re-balanced the grocery bag against her hip, looking expectant, he pressed on.

"I could use some real advice on the New Year's thing," He kind of grumbled, in that Jim Hopper way - Talking without saying the words fully, some self-preservation thing. "And we haven't talked in weeks, not really, y'know."

He sounded like he wanted to roll his own eyes as he said this. He sounded like he couldn't believe what a fool he was for her.

"That doesn't make sense, Chief. I see you more than my kids some days." Joyce knew what he meant, of course. They'd been dancing around each other these last few weeks, and no, had not really talked. She knew. But playing ignorant made her feel she had some level of control left in this situation.

"You've disappeared right in front of my eyes, Joyce. You've been a figment." He gestured, shrugged, his hands still pocketed, his jacket moving with him as he motioned. He sounded pouty, he wasn't quite meeting her eyes.

"Are you here to criticise how I'm mourning?" She asked with disbelief.

Besides, he knew why she was quiet. He knew what she was struggling with, though even she did not fully understand the complexities of all of this shit she was feeling.

Finally, she pushed past him, feeling her ears burn beneath the hat. She deflected his offer to carry the bag, turning away from him, huffing.

She wasn't - Jesus, she wasn't angry at him, she didn't want to fight with him, but she didn't know, she couldn't - They couldn't -

She knew it had not been easy on him. The whole thing - She still was a bit baffled by it all. He had hidden El, struggled with that...struggled to keep it from Joyce, whilst still trying to help her put her son back together again, with every fibre of his being. He was there when Bob had...fuckthere it was again...He had pulled her away from certain death, too...

Christ, Hop had offered to go first, immediately, strode to the door fully intent on doing whatever he needed to in order to get the lights back on. Joyce hadn't even processed that, the stupid sonofabitch. Had he even thought, had he even considered - Just so blindly brave, so obnoxiously gallant was he, that he was just going to walk to the basement, and he would have been the one dead.

Jim did not have much concern for his own well-being, and Joyce had a suspicion that behaviour coincided with the loss of Sara. She got it, she did. She would have torn herself to shreds if it meant saving Will, and if she got lost in the process, then so be it - There was no point to her being, otherwise.

She hoped raising El would reignite a bit of his survival instincts, that he wouldn't be so self-destructive (she assumed this was a change in process, because there was no way he could have looked after her for nearly a year if he was still a boozing, pill-popping, womanizer).

Joyce understood how he was feeling, deeply - Joyce knew when they locked eyes that they were both aching, and tired, and their bond forged in goddamn fire at this point. They were woven at the core, there was no separating from him after all they'd been through (but that was just it - that was what was so huge).

But, she just wanted to be alone. She didn't want to do this now, not here, not with him. He was the most steadfast thing in her life, and she couldn't do this right now. It was too soon, and not soon enough, and it was too much, too delicate, to do right now.

"I told you what I'm here for. I mean, Joyce, we've been gettin' through this together." Their coping mechanisms always were a bit different - Of course, when she most wanted to be alone, he didn't.

Joyce didn't want to turn on him, but she couldn't - she couldn't handle what was so heavily unsaid.

She trudged through the snow toward the house, sputtering and perplexed.

"What - why do you need to get through this? I - he - Bob," The argument died on her tongue.

"I knew Bob as long as you did. I was right there beside you,"

"You don't have to tell me that." Joyce snapped, an accusation in her tone that she didn't really mean.

She didn't blame Jim. Not like he seemed to think, and not like he blamed himself. She blamed herself, she blamed the entire situation. Not Hopper. She didn't blame him for Bob's death, but needed him at arm's length in the aftermath, not because of his part in it, but because of the throbbing guilt that she was growing.

Her keys were in the door, he was watching her struggle to hold the groceries, and unlock the door, but smartly didn't try to take the bag again. She was feeling ferocious, that was clear. He loved when she was ferocious, he just didn't understand what was spiraling now.

"Come on, then. If this is gonna happen, can you get it over? I can't stand the teenage theatrics." He was going to guess, and he sounded frustrated. He felt needy, and aloof, and hated any setback in their dynamic.

Jim took his hat off, running an unsteady hand through his hair, truly on edge just watching her stubbornly open the goddamn door.

"What are you talking about," her voice was flat. She pushed the door open, set the groceries inside, but didn't venture in, and didn't invite him to.

"Is this not the next step in the grieving process? Blame the asshole cop? Your friend the asshole cop, but just the same." He motioned to himself, cocky and brazen, and hurt.

"Don't project your shit on me. Not once did I say-" Joyce shook the keys in her hand toward him for emphasis.

"You don't have to say anything. Giving me the cold shoulder two

months later? Can't look me in the eye. This ain't my first rodeo. Not the first time someone took something like this out on me." Now there was something in his tone that was too weighty to be meant for her.

Joyce was so damned attune to him, it clicked naturally, she didn't even have to piece it together, there was no delay in her retort.

"I'm not Diane, Hop. Like I said - Don't project that shit on me." Joyce pulled back the fight in her voice, ever so slightly. She wasn't being fair, she knew.

His jaw set, nostrils flared, chest puffed up with a deep inhale. He didn't say anything, and seemed to back off his argument, too. They were on the same team, after all.

Joyce proceeded. She turned inside the house, scooped the bag up, and busied herself in the kitchen putting things away.

She left the door open, and Hopper entered without another word exchanged. El was at the Wheelers, too, a brief escape during which Nancy was around to keep an eye on everything. Joyce knew, that on the best of days, when El was out of his supervision, he needed distraction from the worry, and time to kill.

She wouldn't turn him away.

It had been colder than usual the last couple of weeks, and Joyce left her coat on as she bustled about, falling into her after work routine. She filled the kettle, turned on the oven, cranked up the thermostat, and opened the oven door to hasten the heating process. More than once the open stove, and hot burners, were the only source of heat she had until next pay-day, so she felt lucky to just be using it as a supplement on these subzero days.

Hopper kept his coat on, too, as you could very nearly see your breath in the living room.

"D'you have heat, Joyce?" She rolled her eyes with her back to him, the cautious concern obvious in his voice.

She was well-versed in the cycle of poverty in the winter, and these were just the things she had to do - They were necessities, and she knew there was a stigma attached to it, but she was a survivalist, and didn't much care if Jim Hopper was judging her.

"Yes, I have heat. But not to waste in the daytime when no one is here,"

"Your pipes,-"

"I know the conditions that freeze pipes, Chief," She'd stayed off work, and had Jonathan stay home from school, more than once during a cold snap, when they had to keep a heater trained on the lines, because she knew she would be coming home to frozen, and later, burst pipes if no one did. "These aren't them. I'm just trying to get some heat rolling,-"

"You're saving oil, but using power,-"

"I can make arrangements to pay the power bill down,-"

"Do you have enough insulation around your lines,-"

"Jim Hopper, I've looked after myself, these boys, and this house longer than you know. Do not stand in my kitchen, and judge the measures I take in the dead of winter. I get by, I know what I'm doing, and my father has been dead ten years, thank you very much, so I'm not going to listen to that tone of voice from you."

Jim held his hands up, shook his head, and retreated. She didn't know why he didn't just leave, or why she didn't just ask him to. Either did he.

Though, it might be because that, even with the contention, this house was beginning to only feel like home to Joyce if he was in it.

His presence was big, and warm, and when he was here - even now, when they were sparring - it filled every corner of the house. The oozing bad that lived here, the remnants of demogorgons, demodogs, and general Upside Down darkness...she felt it pushed out by him.

The house felt alive, and whole, and calming when he was here. For

so many years it was stressful for Joyce to have to come home, to fucking Lonnie, to fucking cold, dark emptiness. Even Bob's presence had not affected the state of the house so much.

Big, tall, broad Jim Hopper softened the edges of the terrible times under this roof. He made her want to stay, to strive to make, and keep, this a happy, comforting home for her boys.

It was becoming that for Hopper, and El, too.

Joyce hated that she didn't want him to go. She hated that Will slept better when Hopper was here, and she wept the first night that Jim, and El, stayed. She wept from the pain of it all, but also at the relief of having someone else there with her, on alert.

Because, it wasn't even that Will seemed scared, or that he wasn't comforted enough by his Mom in the home - It was more that her sweet, perceptive, feeling boy knew that Joyce was more at ease when Hopper was there. Will slept better, because he knew Joyce slept at all when Hop took watch (and when would living her fucking life stop feeling like they were on guard, on watch?). What a fucking web they wove.

Joyce hated that she was becoming, at best, accustom to his presence, and at worst, dependent on it. Even when they were at odds, it felt normal, it felt lively. She had not felt alive in this house in so many years. She felt weighed down by it, strapped to it, under Lonnie's thumb, under debt, and tragedies. It was an obligation, it was a haunted hole in which she relived some of her hardest times.

But Hop, Hop - See, this was what she was afraid of, having him around so soon, this was why she was cautious, and on guard, and quiet these last weeks. She didn't want to feel so good being around him, she didn't want to lose herself in this consuming warmth, and affection, before Bob's grave was cold.

She squeezed her eyes shut, took a breath, and continued in her routine.

3. wait so long

Thank you for reading, and your reviews!

"Hey, Joycie," Jim gave her a few minutes before trying again. She could hear the practiced patience in his tone.

The kitchen was darkening as the sun set, and she flipped the light on. December kept them wrapped in its dim, cold cloak.

He looked so good with the warm light in the room. He hadn't called her Joycie in two decades.

"I wasn't judging you," He spoke low, his voice deep. He knew how to reel her back in, how to be steady but gentle. "I know you know how to take care of your house, and your boys. I would never say otherwise. I would hit anyone for saying otherwise," At this she smiled, sighing.

"I just worry." Hopper had removed his coat and hat, and was slowly edging back into the kitchen, mirroring her movements. He orbited around her like she was the sun.

"Sometimes your concern is condescending, Hop."

"I'm working on that."

Joyce made a noise of friendly skepticism, but it filled her with that warm, prickling affection from which she hid.

"Are you really here to talk about the party again? Let them have it, what else can I say?" She was still busying herself, though couldn't ignore his large frame filling her kitchen, couldn't ignore his efforts.

"You can handle a few teenagers, Chief." Joyce dipped her head, smiling as she used his title. Each time she called him Chief, he looked both exasperated, and enlivened. It was mockery, but it was flirty. It was playful, it was comfortable.

"I can," Jim admitted, a small shrug, his uniform stretching tightly

across his shoulders. His whole face changed when it was just the two of them. He smiled in a way she had forgotten about, he made her smile in a way that he forgot about.

"I just like everything better when you're there." He said, as he towered over her in a way that was entirely pleasant.

He cast warmth, not a shadow.

Joyce softened, some, her wide, wild eyes narrowing. There was a fondness in those brown depths, a calm, and she felt the tension slipping away. Jim meant it, because he was a shitty liar, and if he didn't mean something he wouldn't bother saying it. He wasn't a sentimental man, but if there was someone to bring it out in him - It was Joyce (and, in another lifetime, Sara).

"I like everything better when you're there, too, Hop." She said, softly (she knew she shouldn't say it, was battling to not admit), so soft that Jim wasn't sure he was supposed to acknowledge it, so quietly that he wasn't sure her lips moved. The only indication of it was the pink in her cheeks, the shine of her eyes, and the rate of his heart.

Shit. He didn't have a hope in hell.

Joyce was pouring them both coffee with the kettle she boiled, without asking, without needing to ask. She knew him then. She knew him now.

Jim sat at his designated chair at the table, his leg bouncing underneath.

Somehow, among the trauma, and the near-death battles...the fact that her missing son was what brought her back into his life...Joyce was still the freshest breath of air, when all was said and done. She was an old flame, a lost love, but still was exciting, unpredictable, passionate. All Jim wanted to do was make her days a little easier, all he wanted was to be present. Joyce deserved it, if nothing else (and for now, there could be nothing else).

The longer they spent together, the younger Jim felt – He felt giddy, almost, which is not something the Chief of Police was sure he had

been since he was seventeen, and making out with Joyce between fifth and sixth period.

He knew it was selfish. He knew it was risky. He was just so goddamned relieved that she knew about El, was so glad to have her support with that, so glad to support her back. There was nothing – nothing hidden, nothing in the shadowy place between them – Except Bob, except her grief.

Jim didn't want to rush her, but Christ, how he wanted her all to himself. He didn't even - He didn't even know how he wanted her, he didn't connect the dots, or allow himself to think beyond - Beyond friendship, beyond this duo, this partnership, but - What if, what else...

He was greedy with her, desperate for her time, and attention, in a way that was totally teenage at times. He could see he was eager, could feel that he was perhaps encroaching on her mourning, but he couldn't stop himself.

It had only been two months, and the dark circles beneath her eyes reminded him of that. It had only been two months, and the nightmares that he shared with her reminded him of that.

But the energy with which he was filled when he was in the same room as Joyce was – impossible. He couldn't keep still, even just watching her move around the kitchen, stubborn, and adamant, and refusing to look at him, as she heated her home, he couldn't contain himself.

When they saved his life from those murderous vines, a switch flipped inside of him, for Joyce. Something that was - buried, and faded, and pushed deep, deep down, flamed to life again, and he couldn't contain himself.

It had come around after the first time in the Upside Down, too, after saving Will, but before Eleven, and Bob. It didn't have the chance to become...what it had this time, this...whatever it was, this goddamn devotion to her.

Stop.

"I don't know – I'll think about going. They don't want us there, right?" Joyce said, biting her bottom lip in consideration, the slightest line between her brows.

She knew his cream to sugar ratio, she knew to let it sit for a minute longer than hers, because she liked it scorching, and he was more sensitive to the heat.

"Nah, but we could – I don't know – Build a fire outside, go for a drive, chain smoke on the porch...keep in the proximity."

"Seems a bit fast and loose for that kind of thing, Hop."

"Maybe," He agreed, swooping in for his coffee, and he held the large mug in one hand, easily, while she cradled it in her two. "Maybe I'll have to sit at the door with my gun unholstered the whole night to feel okay. But I'd still rather do it with you there."

"Hop - I said I'll think about it." She hid her face behind her mug as she inhaled, smiling into the drink.

Joyce joined him at the table, finally, and it was something of a truce, he thought.

It was the first time they had been alone since the Snow Ball. Their fight from earlier was already dissipating, and sometimes to fight with her was to be reminded of how sweet it was on her good side.

Jim sighed, and relaxed. His mind kept flitting back over to the Wheelers, fretting over El. Maybe Joyce was right. Maybe the whole thing was a bit fast, and loose. He just couldn't ask El to stay cooped up now that her friends knew she was here, and that she was okay. There was no way. After the Snow Ball had passed without incident, he felt better. He did. And Dr. Owens' measures to help had reassured him. But he was still -

"You're miles away, hmm?" Joyce's voice broke through his cloud of worry, and his heavy brow raised, as she touched his hand.

Her hand was warm, despite the cold. Her heart was warm, despite the loss. Her house was warm, even when he could see his breath.

Joyce shook him to his roots, in a big way.

"Hey, yeah, you know." Jim grunted, rubbing a hand over his beard, shifting in the small chair that creaked beneath him. He sipped loudly from his mug. He wanted to fill the room with noise, wanted to distract himself from it all.

"She'll be okay. They all will be okay." Her voice was small, wavering slightly, but it was sincere. It was hard to be optimistic.

She sighed, then, and he felt her weariness across the table, through where she touched his hand. She held on tighter.

"So will you. You will thrive, Joyce." And he said it with such conviction, such sudden passion, that her eyes watered, overcome with emotion. His large hand covered hers, and squeezed. A pleasant shiver ran down her spine, goosebumps rose on her arms.

"Don't know if I've ever thrived, Hop." Joyce blinked back the tears, a watery laugh on her lips.

"You were the brightest goddamn light in high school, you know that? You thrived, Joyce." He said, and his voice was almost hoarse, almost like he was overcome with emotion, too.

Joyce didn't know who these two shmaltzy middle-aged wrecks were sitting in her kitchen, but they weren't altogether unfamiliar, or surprising, she supposed. They were the products of trauma, of hardship, and grief. These adult versions of themselves grew from abuse, and war, and insurmountable loss. It wasn't pretty. But they were here.

Long moments stretched as they drank, and Joyce kept her hand on his.

"Do you ever think about leaving?" Joyce asked, and her fingers wandered along his wrist, dipping beneath the material of his sleeve to skim wiry arm hair there. It was the most she had touched him since the parking lot. They were...getting comfortable, he thought.

"I left once, didn't work out much for me..." He said gruffly, but off-handedly, casually, as if it would shake off the catastrophic

circumstances which led to his return to Hawkins.

"I never left, though. Bob wanted me to leave." She pulled her hand back just as his fingertips skimmed hers again, and she reached for the ashtray across the table. She dug her smokes from the pocket of her jacket that was slung over the chair, and she knew he was staring at her, because her face was burning.

Joyce had not told anyone about that, yet. Was sure she wouldn't have told anyone. She avoided his eyes, hand trembling ever so slightly as she flicked her lighter.

"What?" Came Jim's voice, and he sounded about as off-kilter as she expected.

Jim's low-level of jealousy through the few months of her relationship with Bob was just that - so indiscernible - that she wasn't quite sure it had been there at all.

Of course, it made sense now, knowing that he was housing El, that he couldn't get too close - Well, he had already been close, but he pulled back. The comments always struck her as odd, because Jim had...disappeared, but yet he still made little digs at Bob. Nothing callous, but just enough for Joyce to look at him, and wonder.

So, she knew it would throw him off to hear that Bob was so serious about her, and her boys, that he asked her to leave.

(Jim Hopper was the only other person to ever ask her to leave Hawkins).

"Yeah. Maine. Buy his parents' house..." The words were easier for her to say around the cigarette, muffled, and not quite there.

"Shit." He was staring at her, his gaze gliding from her eyes, to her mouth, where she still struggled with the lighter.

"Yeah." She sighed, cigarette moving where it stuck to her lips.

Jim quickly put a cigarette in his own mouth, and his eyes were sharp, clear, a blue so lively that it took her breath away.

He lit his smoke, as she gave up on hers, tossing her lighter on the table, scattering to the edge. Their eyes locked with a deep inhale from both, and she was surprised, nearly alarmed, at the intensity radiating from him.

It was all falling into perspective, perhaps.

Joyce blinked slowly, long lashes brushing her cheeks as she glanced down - Demure, sensitive, certain. She gripped the smoke between her fingers, securing it in her lips, and leaned in close to Jim, looking up at him expectantly, eyelids heavy.

He ignited the lighter with one flick of his thumb, and neither of them blinked as he held it steady in front of Joyce, watching her tiny shoulders rise on the inhale, her doe eyes reflecting the flame.

Shit.

4. at my best

It occurred to Joyce how quiet it was in the house, though things between them were suddenly so loud.

Jim was nearly sprawled across the table in the space between them, and the smoke from their cigarettes mingled together. Joyce hunched her shoulders as they smoked, neither pulling back after he had lit hers. Their elbows touched.

She did not want things to be quiet between them again, like it had been the last few weeks. Her guilt was...enormous, and tangible, but she couldn't - She couldn't be without Hopper.

Joyce's cheeks burned at this thought, and her anxious nature protested, telling her that without him was exactly what she needed to be.

She gulped, and ashed her smoke, holding it aloft, letting it burn up. Her gaze unfocused and far off, as she became uncomfortable with the fact she could hear every breath Jim took. There was an intimacy to it for which she wasn't prepared.

Jim smoked fervently, seemingly needing the nicotine to calm him in the heaviness of her kitchen. Quiet had been easier, had been less poignant. Quiet was stressful, but in a different way than was this.

"Why," Jim cleared his throat as his voice caught, breaking some of the tension sparking and crackling at Joyce's little kitchen table. "Why didn't you go?"

Maine was the last place he could fathom Joyce. Jim thought of Joyce somewhere warm, sunny, and west. Jim thought a warm climate was something that would give Joyce one less thing to worry about. Winter was hard on everyone in their little town, and he had no doubts Joyce got through them all - But he still imagined her in the sunshine, freckles across her cheeks, and she would be smiling.

He could not imagine her smiling in Maine, and maybe that was ego, more than fact, fueling that thought.

Joyce sighed, tapping her smoke in the ashtray again, though she had yet to take another puff.

"He knocked the idea around once, and I just wasn't...there," They met eyes again, Jim nodded in understanding, exhaling smoke from his nose. "He brought it up again in the lab, and damn, Hop," Joyce sighed again, heavy, and it was the kind of sigh to try keep her anxiety at bay, the kind to take a deep breath to avoid hyperventilating, and spiraling.

"I thought about it, but for the wrong reasons. I thought about it as the chance to...take my boys, and run. I wasn't figuring Bob into the equation as much as I should have." She ducked her head, shaking it, ashamed, finally taking another much-needed drag off her cigarette.

"No?" Jim's eyebrows shot up his forehead, and when he did that, it gave her a clear view of those penetrating eyes (which she didn't need anymore of at the moment, thank you very much). He looked - Perhaps surprised, but happily so.

Pleased, though not quite smug.

"I wasn't...totally open with Bob, how could I have been? I wasn't all in. It stings to say that, because it was still a lot. He was still..." Joyce looked at Hop for help, for validation with where she was going with this - She didn't want to undermine how important, how vital Bob was to her (and to saving all of them), but she also...needed Hop to know that it wasn't an all-consuming love affair, or anything.

"A superhero." Jim supplied with a grunt, a nod, stubbing his smoke out in the ashtray beside him.

He had seen Will's drawings, of course. He agreed with the sentiment on the late Bob Newby, even if he was jealous to the bone of Bob the Brain when he was alive, and in Joyce's bed.

"Yeah." Joyce bit her bottom lip, and quirked her brow, almost apologetically, almost with regret, at which Hopper frowned.

She didn't know how to marry these feelings. She didn't know how to carry this suffocating guilt about the loss of Bob, and spend these

intimate, quiet moments with Jim. She didn't know how to be respectful of Bob, while feeling so goddamn domestic with Jim, so soon after Bob's death. She didn't know how to look Hop deep in the eyes, and not feel like she was betraying Bob's memory.

She didn't know.

It was too soon.

Joyce and Jim had always been too much, at the wrong time - They were never casual people in each other's lives.

"You finished?" Joyce asked, gesturing, and Jim broke his stare, blinking and nodding. She stood, and he handed her the coffee mug, their fingers brushing. His hands were warm, and Joyce's skin tingled at the contact.

Apparently, if she needed to be warm in her damned house in the middle of a cold snap, she should just invite Hopper over to dance around unsaid things in her kitchen, all which flamed her from the inside out. Fuck.

Joyce went to the sink, rinsed the mugs clean, and wiped the counter down with the cloth. Her chest was rising and falling as she breathed, and she was trying to get a handle on it before turning back to Hopper. She didn't think Hop necessarily needed to know all that she was feeling, not - not yet, not now. But shit, if one thing Joyce was bad at it was hiding anything from him.

"Hey," Jim approached her from behind, and for a man so large, he had either done so quietly, or Joyce was too distracted to hear him. She gave a start, and tossed the cloth into the sink, drying her hands on her jeans, and she was feeling a bit...cornered.

Though, she had not ever really minded that, with Jim - Being close, being cornered. There was always something predatory about his...his what? His pursuit? Is that what this was? Hell, it couldn't have been, shouldn't have been, but whatever it was - Joyce didn't mind it.

She gripped the counter with both hands, pressing her lips together

as she quaked gently, her shoulders tense.

At the same time, she felt likely to cry, and didn't want him to hear, didn't want him to know how - how torn, how vulnerable, how scared she was of what they were unearthing that afternoon.

"Joyce, I wonder if you know," His voice was low, and a tone which he reserved for her only. Goosebumps rose along the back of her neck, as she sensed just how close he was behind her. She did not turn around, and he could see her grip on the counter tighten.

Hopper pressed onward.

"I spent the last year wanting to tell you about the kid," Hop said, and Joyce sighed, bottom lip between her teeth, frowning whilst he couldn't see her face. She knew he felt guilty about that, about outright lying to her, at times, for the last year.

To be honest, Joyce had other things to worry about, than to hold that against him. She was a reasonable woman, she didn't...distrust Hop, she didn't doubt that he acted with best intentions (however it played out). He had nothing to worry about there. She would tell him that, she thought.

He did good.

Jim ran his fingers through the wisps of hair along Joyce's neck, not quite grazing her skin, and had he said anything in a minute? Had they been standing here for an hour?

Joyce's cheeks flushed, and eyes watered as her nose prickled with emotion at the contact. There was something about Jim Hopper being...sensitive, affectionate, letting his guard down, that completely did her in.

His big hands fell to her shoulders, and he squeezed gently, trying to ease the tension. Joyce tilted her neck, sighing, melting into the touch ever so slightly.

She remembered rubbing deep knots out of his shoulders after football practice, or a shift at the filling station. She remembered being this close to him, in another lifetime.

"I would be up in that cabin dealing with it all, and failing, it felt like - I knew you woulda helped. I couldn't," He was nearly mumbling, but it was genuine, it wasn't forced.

His hands skimmed down - she was still wearing her polyester work smock - and brushed against hers, resting on either side of them on the counter. He was bracketing her in - so much for this not being a pursuit - and if she leaned back just a little, and he came forward just so -

They both moved accordingly, closing the small space between them, and he was pressed against Joyce, barely, without intent. He rested his chin atop her head as she settled against his chest, their hands still braced on the counter. He was nothing but heat against her back.

"I couldn't risk it, Joyce, but you gotta know...keeping it from you like that, I knew I was sacrificing something. I knew I was losing out on that time...with you. When Will started to have the episodes, I wanted to be here when you needed me, but I was,-"

"You were here when I needed you,-" Joyce said on a whisper, her eyes closed, not daring to look at him in such close proximity.

"No, not every time,-" She could feel his mouth move against her head, and her wild hair stuck to Jim's lips.

You're both in your forties, Joyce told herself, as if they were acting inappropriate for their age, or were doing something salacious.

It was comfort.

"Every time it mattered, you were. You were stretching yourself thin, and I didn't even realize. I wish,-" Her head snapped up from his chest, shaking it as she thought about how overwhelming this year had been.

Jim put his hands back on her shoulders, gently, rubbing, and coaxing her head back down. He liked touching her, liked her in his arms, had fought the last year to not touch her every time they spoke. He wasn't doin' so good at that battle just then.

"I wish I could have told you." Hopper said, completely muffled as he

pressed his lips into her hair again, and this was almost an age-old thing between them. Her hair was always his favourite place to bury his mouth, his nose, his hands.

"You kinda disappeared." Joyce said, and if she thought back she could pinpoint exactly when Jim stopped coming around so much. It was gradual, it was gentle, the way he retreated into that year, raising El.

He was always good at disappearing from Joyce's life so quietly that she didn't notice. He knew what he was doing, how to ease himself out, and avoid the confrontation, though none of the pain.

"Yeah. I didn't mean - I didn't want to. I only did after," A pause. "Bob started coming around, and I figured it was...safe to...withdraw, it'd be less...noticeable." He finished, almost as if he knew what she was thinking, almost as if he was in her damned brain.

Joyce did not know when they had become fucking ingrained in each other, but it was dizzying.

"I noticed, Hop. But I understand."

"I knew you would. I know you do." Hopper said, and as a thanks, or some gesture, Jim slid his hands down, squeezed her sides, then looped his arms around her middle from where he stood behind her.

She released the counter, her fingers numb from the strength with which she had gripped it, and she clutched her own hands overtop Jim's arms, holding him to her.

Joyce wondered if Hop remembered standing like this, wrapped up together, watching the sunrise the morning after graduation. Or the night before he shipped off for 'Nam, a blanket draped around his shoulders, and flowing down to her small frame below, as they passed a smoke back and forth, Hopper taking it right from her lips.

She wondered if he remembered standing - almost - like this, sometime in the first year he came back to Hawkins, after losing Sara and Diane and himself. Joyce drove out to his trailer on a whim, away from Lonnie's bleary eyes.

It was the first time she saw him cry, and the first time he saw bruises on her wrists, as that day Joyce hugged around him from behind.

They had circled around each other in some kind of way for most of their lives, Joyce thought, and she wondered if they would ever stick the landing.

Joyce closed her eyes, and leaned into his embrace, even as she knew now was not the time.

5. take me back

Thank you to those who read & comment - It means a lot, and I am just so wrapped up in these two.

i had all and then most of you, some and now none of you
take me back to the night we met (the night we met, lord huron)

Jim recalled the first week he found El - That first interaction with Joyce afterward. He had gone to the trailer early one morning to collect some more comforts of home, and checked his machine. Joyce's voice was on it, tired and strained, and the time stamp was sometime the other side of three A.M.

Thought you might still be up. You don't have to call me back, Hop.

God, the fuckin' defeat in her tone caused him to drop everything in his hands, and drive over to her place. He didn't think twice about the hours that had passed since her call.

Joyce opened the door that morning, before he could knock, though his hand posed to do so, the other tugging his hat from his head. His mouth gaped open, brow pinched, about to ask if the monsters had returned, waiting to hear the worst had happened, and he wasn't there.

She didn't look like she had cried, but she looked tired. The most tired since the night he thought they pulled Will's body from the quarry.

There were times when he first returned home, that Will only slept when the sun was up - When there were fewer shadows in which anything could lurk. He'd miss school those days, and Joyce would stay up all night with Will, and go to work in the evenings, when Jonathan was home. But she didn't sleep when Will slept, too anxious was she, and understandably so. She was running on absolute empty.

This was her day off, and she hauled Hopper in by the hand before he could say a word. He followed her through the dim, quiet house,

down the hallway. Jonathan was already off to school, and for now all was calm - Will was finally asleep.

Joyce closed her bedroom door, curling into the bedcovers. She shivered beneath them, full of nerves, as Hopper sat on the edge of the bed, his mouth still agape. There were no boundaries, no words, and it was hard to see her so vulnerable.

He remembered his chest constricting at the sight of her beneath the covers - for a multitude of reasons, but the main one being that she looked so small, and yet here she was trying to hold the entire world together for her boys. Joyce often tried to hold the entire world together, even as she suffered beneath the weight of it.

Jim instinctively reached out, and ran a large, warm, hand from her shoulder, down the line of her body, to her hip, and up again - a soothing, mesmerizing pattern - until she slept.

He stayed there the entire day - retreating to the living room to watch the typical daytime fare, and it became a day off for him, too. He called Flo, told her exactly where he was and why, tiptoed around the kitchen to make himself a coffee, and settled onto the sunken couch.

He let them both rest.

The quiet, sleepy affection with which Joyce greeted him in the middle of the afternoon was worth it all. The beatific, warm, crinkly-eyed smile she gave him as she padded out of the bedroom in a tshirt down to her knees was nearly his undoing. Her hair was a voluminous auburn mane, and for her Jim felt his heart clench, race, and burst.

It was almost too much - He wanted to pack up El, tell Joyce everything that very first week, and take up stake in the Byers' home. He didn't want to leave Joyce, or her boys, not then, not ever. She blossomed in the broad, tall light that Hopper cast, and she felt safe there, and it killed him.

No, he couldn't - He couldn't think about it, couldn't think about what might have happened if he didn't have to hide El, hide in the

woods...withdraw, disappear...

It killed him to think of all the nights that his phone rang, that he didn't hear - Until, eventually, she stopped trying to call, and took Bob up on his offer for coffee.

God, what a fuckin' fool he felt then, now, always, but he was getting to plead his case, clear the air, and it was coming full circle. He knew it was too good to be true, it was playing with fire, tempting fates, it was salt in the wounds, but it was real.

Joyce had always been so goddamned real.

He could have told her something - Could have told her that it was something big, and secret, that would take his time, and he couldn't tell her what, but -

Just know, Joyce, I am doing this for everyone's safety. Please believe me - Please understand -

He said it a few times in his head, had thought about telling her just that when he would run into her face-to-face.

Because, Jim was - He was helpless before her. When did that happen? When did a distraught Joyce Byers bring him to his knees again, instead of to irritation, like when she first showed up at the station?

Hopper guessed it was when he realized she hadn't changed, even though she married that shit Lonnie. They hadn't meant to hurt each other, all those years back, and had only hurt themselves in the intervening years - He supposed that was when. When he realized she was as fierce, resilient, and clever as ever. She was the same Joyce from high school, the same Joyce who stole his smoke from between his lips, and then stole a kiss.

Yeah, he thought about telling her, but there was the...black hole with which to contend. Selfish jackass, Jim thought.

He just didn't want to let either of them feel things so big between them again, because - Everything would get destroyed, sooner or later, wouldn't it? That's what black holes did.

That's what he did.

Even though, it felt so good to say this to her now. It felt so good to release some of this god forsaken hurt, this tension. Jim had been desperate to tell Joyce, the entire year - To prove, to explain, to please let her know that he never wanted to do any of it - Never wanted to leave her out, or not answer the phone, never wanted to go off the grid.

He couldn't believe he was getting to do so while he held her in this familiar way. His mouth was dry, his shirt stuck to his neck, but here they were, he could find no reason to leave this moment. Black hole be damned, at least for the time.

Joyce was content in his embrace, though her mind wandered for the long minutes they stood together. He rested his chin on her shoulder, at one point, and his breathing was slow, steady, and soothing. She imagined that his eyes were closed, too, and this was - This was a little more than comfort, this was intimacy, this was...taking liberties.

Between them, things were never really finished. Once they touched like they touched, once they loved, no matter how young, or explosive - They never really completely closed that off. Joyce and Jim back together? Never entirely off the table (something Lonnie knew, and it was a point of contention in their marriage).

There was a possession, a right, they felt to each other that had lay dormant these long years. They belonged to each other, first, and it was so on the surface that it was too easy to reveal, it was second nature.

Joyce felt like she was left hanging with Hopper. He left her hanging, she left him hanging, and now that she knew about El, about just what Hop had done for the last year...it changed, well, nearly everything.

If she had known about El at the time, she never would have taken up with Bob. Because - Because why? Joyce asked herself. Because she would have waited for Hop.

Hopper was fucking foremost.

He tried so hard, and maybe Joyce wouldn't have taken up with Bob, had she known, but Jim wouldn't have wanted her to wait - So says the stubborn part of himself, whilst the tender part of course would have wanted that - Had always wanted that (her).

Not to say...not to know if anything was going to happen, if either of them wanted anything to happen, but - She felt loyal to him in a way that a simple friendship did not call for...she felt devoted to him in a way that was...goddamn gravitational. She felt it back, even more so after the latest events.

Maybe...maybe it all took place, so they could get to this point, to get here, to feel - To feel what?, the voice inside of Joyce's head asked, poking and prodding her along the dark path.

It was too much to explain, too much to say - A lot with which to grapple, and make peace. They both were so...so hurt by - Jesus, so much. It was nothing simple - It wasn't just recent, it was decades of unending bullshit from each other, from their former spouses, an alternate dimension, from kids, work, from death. Shit.

There was no neat and tidy way to pack it up, there was no telling which trauma would overwhelm them on which day - But, but what about, what if they were happy again, maybe things wouldn't be so overwhelming? Maybe the traumas wouldn't have such a chance to rear their heads?

Joyce felt like she could cry, because she just didn't know. She didn't know what he needed, she didn't know how to ask for what she needed - She didn't know how to trust someone again, as wholly as she already trusted him, and it was - It was scary. It was overwhelming, and she felt her breathing quicken.

No, there were no easy answers, even as nice, as reassuring as it was in his arms. Joyce's conscience and rationale were dulled by his big, encompassing presence, but she knew reality was very close just outside.

The phone rang. Neither of them moved, when normally Joyce would have sprinted to answer. It rang – and rang – and rang, and then stopped. Joyce released her breath with a tremor, and Jim's long fingers flexed on her rib-cage, grasping her to him.

It was a moment soon to be broken, it seemed to say, and Joyce heard him inhale deeply through his nose, and felt it exhale hot onto her ear, through his mouth. Savouring the moment. Breathing her in. Preparing himself. Getting ready to let go.

Joyce trailed her fingers, faintly, up and down his forearms, his sleeves pushed up to his elbows. She felt his warm skin, his rough knuckles, his wiry arm hair. She was breathing shallowly through her mouth, not willing – Not ready, not sure – She didn't want him to move, or leave, or disappear – She never wanted him to – But, it was – Oh was it ever, so, so soon.

The phone rang again, and he kissed the top of her head, earnestly, as his big hands splayed across her body for an instant, and then retracted, as he crossed the kitchen in long strides to answer the phone. She put a hand to her mouth and stifled a sudden sob, her eyes stinging.

"Byers residence," Was his almost breathless greeting. "Hey kid, yeah, it's me."

Joyce turned around to look at him, hugging one of her arms across herself where his had just been, chewing her other thumb as they locked eyes across the kitchen, through his conversation.

His eyes were bright, clear with emotion, and the tips of his ears red, she could see. He scrubbed a hand across his beard, then put it on his hip. It was so goddamn familiar that Joyce could have really cried.

"Sure, yeah, we'll head over. Tell El to be ready, too. Well, I dunno, I'll see what she says. See ya soon." It was Will, and she nodded along with Hop's words until he hung up the phone.

"Kids ready to split. Said you wanted him home for dinner." Joyce nodded again, and realized the damn thing wasn't in the oven.

"Shit," She said, going to the fridge and pulling out the lasagna she had prepped. She popped it into the oven, and started the timer.

"He asked if El could come for dinner." Hop said, and it was so serious that she would have laughed if the circumstances were any different, if they weren't balancing on the edge of something so raw. She could tell that he was worried that...something would change, because of this swirling, awkward, palpable thing between them - That neither of them wanted to put into words yet.

"Hop," Joyce said, shrugging out of her work smock, and into her favourite brown cardigan whilst holding eye contact with him.

She widened her eyes and moved her eyebrows, trying to communicate some semblance of trust between them.

"El is our girl. She is always welcome for dinner." Joyce nearly flinched at how she very much specified El, though that was her intention, she didn't mean to exclude Hop. He was always welcome for dinner, too, but she couldn't - She couldn't vocalize it, because what if - What if something did change? He was welcome until maybe some day he wasn't, she supposed, and that wasn't such a nice thing to say.

"Right," He shoved his hat back onto his head. "Want me to go grab 'em?"

"It doesn't matter, either one of us will burn this damn thing," Joyce smiled, and returned to the fridge to dig out only vaguely wilted lettuce to throw together a salad. "You don't mind, though?"

"I don't mind, Joyce." Hop's smile back was tight-lipped and didn't reach his eyes, and Joyce bit her lip as he headed to the front door.

"Hey, Hop," She called, pushing her sleeves up as she washed the vegetables over a bowl, craning her neck to watch for him to re-enter the room.

"Joyce?" He had a cigarette dangling from his lips, his police parka on, though loose and unzipped. His brow crumpled, his hip cocked, and she wasn't - She wasn't sure.

"You did good, you know? You didn't need my help, you, um - You did real good with El, Hop," He tucked the smoke behind his ear, and crossed the kitchen as she spoke, and Joyce pulled her hands out of the sink in a rush, wetting her front in the process. She didn't know what he was - doing, thinking, feeling. One thing was that his expression was absolutely goddamn tender, with an intensity in his eyes.

"You're a natural. You've been a father to a daughter, no matter what, for all these years. I can see it, I can." Hop stopped nearly toe to toe with Joyce, as her back pressed against the counter, and she had to bow her back to see up into his eyes.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, his jaw clenched, and he grasped Joyce's wet hands in his own, holding them against his chest. If there was ever a time...

He leaned down and pressed a fierce kiss to her forehead, bumped his nose against hers affectionately, and then kissed the side of her angular, delicate jaw, his nose brushing her cheek, the rasp of his beard against her skin.

Oh.

"Oh."

"I'll be back soon, Joycie." His voice was steady, unwavering, but there was a sharp intake of breath as he pulled away from her that said what he couldn't, and told her what she needed to know.

Jim would be gone all of ten minutes to collect the kids, and Joyce had a quick cry and smoke as the lasagna cooked in the oven.

6. living this life

Thank you for reading, and reviewing! You brighten a girls day!

Jim thought about Joyce on his drive to the Wheelers. He might have took it a little slower than normal, steering the Blazer careful and steady through the turns, pulling away from the stop signs gradually, didn't squeal a tire once. He wanted the time to think about her, think about it (them), and he knew as soon as El was in the vehicle she would pick up on his pensive mood.

He didn't tap the horn when he pulled up to the curb like he typically would, instead giving the kids the extra minutes to notice his arrival themselves. He shut the vehicle off, and sat there as the windows fogged up. The cold stabbed through him, the joints in his hands stiff, and his eyes dry in the unyielding air.

The discomfort of the cold was grounding him. He felt apt to spiral too far one way or the other - Too far for her, or too far away from her. Too consumed by her, but too guilty for the shit he was trying with her so soon after Bob. He cracked the window, lit a smoke, and let the cold ache his lungs, the nicotine zing through his veins, not doing much to calm him. Instead, his hands shook as he thought about Joyce.

Jim was a goddamn goner. If it was anyone else he'd telling himself to pull it together.

What she had said before he left - About El, about being a father to a daughter...no matter what...shit. It got him. She always, always had that way with him - She always got to him, got right to the fuckin' heart of it with no effort at all. Joyce had always been perceptive - So too were her boys, especially Will, who sometimes Hopper couldn't hold eye contact with when they were in the same space as his mother. Will could see his hand clear as day, Hopper was sure.

Joyce had always known him well. She struck a point Jim had made sense of for some-odd months. That - that parenting El felt natural, when in so many ways it was absolutely not. He wasn't completely

inept, as much as his self-loathing said otherwise. He was a father the years with Sara, the years without, and now here with El. He was never...not a father, even though at times he felt the loss of Sara so profoundly, that he never thought he could be one again, never thought he could care like that again.

He never thought he would care at all.

But, Joyce was right. Jim felt it, too - He hadn't...lost the touch, like he worried he had. He was rusty, and she was a teenager with psychic powers, with whom he had battled monsters from an alternate dimension, but - To provide, to protect, to care about the kid came instinctively. They had some throw down matches, certainly, and he knew Joyce wasn't naïve, of course she didn't think it was all smooth-going for them that year in the woods - But he had made it out the other side, and she could see how invested was he - Joyce could see the softer parts of him, of which she had not in decades.

His overprotective nature wasn't new, but it played out differently with El than it might have with Sara. And, well, shit, losing Sara was most of the reason he was overprotective. He could be an arrogant prick, at times, growing up, but he had a big heart at his core. Then, he was an earnest family man with Diane, but it was losing Sara, and losing any semblance of control he had over his life, that really did the job.

He was still learning, still adjusting, and he was prone to a short fuse, but - Shit, it meant something, didn't it? He was trying. He was doing better all the time, and he felt proud of her, he felt bound to the kid, and now that Joyce knew, Jim was so goddamned relieved. He could beg her to help.

Yeah, Joyce got him. Joyce knew what to say, how to say it, and knew that it would - It would mean a lot to him.

It meant a lot to him.

She was always thinking of others, thinking of him, when she had so much on her plate. When her world had just been crushed. Jim's throat tightened when he thought about just how many times Joyce's

world had been crushed.

He thought about he himself crushing her world. Dumb fuckin' kid, Jim thought of his teenaged self, and he really just felt split in two. He felt complete, consuming hope at just the thought of being near her, and he felt dejected, morose defeat at the thought of fuckin' it all up again - Of hurting her, of breaking the fragile framework they had built out of their years-long, odd-defying, care for each other.

Jim felt - Jesus, he felt emotional, he felt like he could fuckin' cry about it - About her, about who she was to him, who he wanted to be to her. He wanted to be all in - But he knew, he knew -

He knew Joyce, too, and he knew she was in complete tatters about - About everything, right? Not just Bob, but Will and his goddamn exorcism, and it was only a year since they thought he was dead! And even Lonnie, still. Even if they just had Lonnie to move beyond - It would have been an exercise in doing so, because he wasn't forgotten, either. How toxic he was to Joyce still lingered around.

It was - It was defeat, Jim thought. He couldn't ask - He already was asking so much of her in the few short weeks she had known about El. There was a bad call one night, and he wouldn't make it home until morning - What did he do? Called Joyce and asked her to hike into his goddamn cabin in the woods so that El wasn't alone. They darkened her doorstep several times a week, just for company, just for companionship for all of them - And they were always welcome, Joyce was always warm to them.

And El - Shit, El adored Joyce, El loved her, and had even broached the subject with him, that - That she loved her Mama, she knew Terry Ives was her Mama, so was it okay to love Joyce, too?

Of course, Jim had said with a choke, and an ache in his chest, his hands clenched hard against the flood of feeling the kid brought on with the question. Joyce is an easy one to love, and she would take care of you, no matter what, if she had to, you know? El did know, and El was starting to know that Jim would take care of Joyce no matter what, too.

Joyce deserved patience, and time. She did. Jim didn't know if - If he

was the best one for the task. He had been an impatient, obtuse brute at times, and not just since Sara died. Before - When he was younger, with the war, with leaving Hawkins, and subsequently Joyce, shit, he owed her...he owed her.

How could he have forgotten all they shared? How could he think they were separate entities, that they were disconnected, or anything short of melded by their history? He loved Joyce, then, and shit, sure, they were young, but one thing he had learned was you're not all that different when you're older. He was still the same person at the root, deep in his chest. So was Joyce. So was Joyce.

That was the thing - The core is the same, the good things, the important things were the same in both of them. Maybe, maybe the bad things were different enough, matured, so the ways they clashed when they were younger seemed to...weave together in a way, now. They seemed such a pair, such a fit, somehow, again.

Jim tugged a hand through his beard, biting on the end of the smoke, and feeling his head throb. Shit. He should just go home, but he was tied up in her, and now the kid was, too. This wasn't going to be easy.

El pulled the door open, and climbed into the backseat - Will took the front.

"I told Will he could sit up front," El said matter-of-factly from the back. It was kind of cool to Will to be riding around in the police truck, Joyce had informed Jim once, and Hopper had such a soft spot for Joyce's youngest, it was...all too much, wasn't it?

"Sure, kid," Hop said, and started the vehicle, cranking the vent to try to defrost the window.

"Why were you sitting here in the cold?" El prodded, as they clicked their seat-belts, and Will sat up straight and tall to see out the front window.

"Wasn't that bad." He grumbled, pulling away from the curb, and steered them back to the Byers' with a squeezing in his throat, a tumbling in his gut. "How goes the campaign?"

The kids launched into the details, and Hopper listened, paid attention, gave them his time instead of the ghosts, and reflections, he was chasing in his mind.

Dinner was nearly ready by the time they were back and situated, all inside with individual Hellos to Joyce. It was funny (heart-warming, endearing) to Jim how they all wanted a bit of her attention, how she was so warm, and inviting, that all three of 'em took their time with her as they came through the door.

Will hugged her, and scrunched up as his face as she kissed his cheek noisily. He started to talk about the campaign in a run-on sentence, pulling a drawing out of his bag and shoving it into his Mother's hands without taking a breath, eyes wide with excitement. Joyce didn't break the flow or take her eyes off him, as she put an arm around El, pulled her in, and kissed the side of her head, until Will went to wash up. Then, it was El's turn to talk, and she did so quietly, while squeezing Joyce's hand, smiling when Joyce fixed a stray curl. Joyce sent her to wash up, too.

It was smooth, it was effortless on Joyce's part, and there was that knot in his throat again, that goddamn emotion. When Jim got to her, the kids out of the room, she held out her hand to take his hat, while he shrugged off his coat, and he just smiled at her, this goofy, big-cheeked smile. Her cheeks were pink, and she was so small beside him. Joyce thanked him for picking them up, and he put an arm across her shoulders as they walked into the kitchen, squeezing gently as his reply.

It felt goddamn domestic, and alarms were sounding in both of their heads. Too much.

They ate dinner, and as opposed to the other meals they had taken together around the table in the last few weeks, Joyce and Jim talked. The kids didn't notice the change, but they might have noticed that Hop sat in the chair beside, instead of across from, Joyce tonight. They even shared a beer poured into two glasses, and had their own quiet, private conversation between the kids rambunctious storytelling. Jonathan came home in the middle of it at all, grabbed a plate, before he was back out the door to Nancy's.

Jim felt like this was it, now. He couldn't - How could he ever live differently, now that they had this? He rubbed a hand over his tired face, imagining what Doc Owens would say at the liberties they were already taking. Liberties that were going to break El's heart if - when? - they had to pull back.

Shit. He had done it again, hadn't he? There was no way they could sustain this, not with - Not with unresolved everything, not with how tender Joyce was - understandably! - feeling. This wasn't the new normal, or anything, and he shouldn't be in her kitchen. Shouldn't feel his heart swell and chest puff out when he watched Joyce and El interact.

Jim laid his fork down, and leaned back in his chair - He was ready for the night to end now, and felt a dark moody cloud glower over him with the realisation.

After dinner came a movie. The Holiday Break meant so much free time, so much energy from the kids, and El was so happy to have her friends around. She was so happy to have pretty much unlimited time to spend with Will, but still got to see Mike regularly, too. That would change when school started back up, so they wanted to let them spend all the time they could, while they could.

Joyce and Jim watched the movie with them, from opposite chairs, until the kids ended up asleep on the couch. Then they slipped out the front door for a smoke, or two.

"I think it's getting milder," Jim said, and the night was calm, the air still. It was one of those winter nights in which every sound echoed, when the snow lay untouched, the moonlight dazzling off of it, and it was very nearly peaceful.

"Still cold enough for this, though." He said, turning to Joyce and tucking her coat over her shoulders, as he grabbed it off the hook when she didn't.

She smiled, and conceded, shoving her arms into the sleeves, and pulling her hair out from the hood.

Though Jim didn't know it, she, too, had spent their evening together thinking about how they were...too close. It was - It was a lot to consider, and it was overwhelmingly nice to consider, when Joyce had lacked anything nice in her life for so long, but it was - Her eyes watered a few times as she thought about it, because it was - Oh, they both knew it - It was too soon, and it was a really raw, intense time at which to happen.

Joyce did not think she had ever wanted anything more, had ever been more sure of Jim Hopper, because she had spent the volatile time of their youth being very unsure of (and in love with) him. But what a fuckin' time to decide this, what a typical tragic stunt from them.

She knew this, they both knew this, but she never wanted him to leave, and he never wanted to leave. It was almost pathetic - They were two people who never wanted to rely on anyone else, who forged ahead blind for so many years, and now they could have something real in each other, finally, but - Joyce sighed, as Jim pulled a smoke from her pack, instead of his own.

"I know you hate mine," He mumbled around the smoke, inhaling as he lit it up.

"I really do," Joyce eagerly accepted the cigarette after he lit it. "You're in your forties, isn't it time for filters, Chief?"

"I don't think it much matters, Joyce," Jim said, softly, and he tucked his hands into his pockets, staring out over her yard. The frost on both of their cars glimmered in the moonlight. His breath stretched up into the night sky, stark against it.

"El can stay the night if she wants," Joyce suggested as things grew quiet on the porch, and he stood slightly ahead of her, his height blocking the yard from her view.

"Ah nah, Joyce, I've already asked too much of you." He turned round to face her, as she huddled in on herself to stay warm. She passed the cigarette back to him, and he took a long drag, tilting his head back.

"You know you haven't actually asked me to do anything, right Hop?"

I want to." Joyce offered, quirking her lips in a strained smile. Every moment they spent together tonight was nice, but so too was it tinged with the impossibility of it all.

"Well, then, I've...expected too much of you." He shrugged, looking down, watching the cigarette burn in his fingers.

"You haven't. I don't mind - It's nice, she's our girl." She meant it, El was, but she didn't know that it killed him each time she said it. Our girl. He knew that she meant - All of them, everyone, cared about El, but in some ways Jim did feel like it was their girl - Him and Joyce.

"Kid adores you, you know that?" Jim was shaking his head, and Joyce didn't know what to take from that, but he moved closer to her.

"Me too, Hop. Seriously - any time, and no matter...where we are, or what we are...who you're with, or anything...El is always welcome, and she's always wanted, here." Joyce had to take the smoke from Jim, he didn't hand it back to her, brow furrowed as she spoke. He was tall in front of her, and seemed to enjoy invading her personal space tonight.

"Appreciate it, Joyce," His gaze trailed down, watching her lips purse around the cig, pressing his own together as he did. Jim had watched her like this back in high school, too. You could never tell what kind of mood he was in when he was intense like that. "What d'ya mean, though, who I'm with?" He was still watching her lips.

The spark that was there from earlier, at her kitchen table, threatened to ignite again.

"Well - if you, find someone, or meet someone -" Joyce floundered a bit, gesturing, with one arm, the other hugged across herself. Jim plucked the cigarette from her flailing hand.

"No - I know, I just mean - you know - shit," He flicked the butt across the porch as the ember fell from what was left of it. He trod on that, and frowned back at Joyce.

"Jim," She so rarely called him by his first name that he bit his

tongue, thinking she might be about to - he didn't know - declare something, shoot him down, put him out of his goddamned misery. But Joyce meant it as caution, as warning, because she could see his mind working.

"No, I know, I didn't want to - I shouldn't, but," Shut up, he told himself, stop talking before she slams the door in your face.

"It's okay," Joyce breathed, her whole body tense as she watched him come undone at the seams. They were both - This evening together had pushed them both, and she could tell he was feeling...keyed up, disruptive. "It's okay, it's too much," Joyce's tone was almost pleading, but Jim wasn't really hearing her, he was tuned in to nothing but how she made him feel.

"I know, but," He had paced, suddenly bursting with nervous energy, and he stopped in front of her, touching her cold, bare hand.

"Jim."

"It's just, Joyce - You're the only one I would be with, you know that? The only person I wanna be with is you."

And, well, all bets were really fuckin' off now.

7. come down

Joyce stiffened, arms hugged around herself.

What did he just say?

Her pulse quickened, fluttering unpleasantly in her throat. Her mouth went dry, a metallic taste on her tongue, and her head swam. She felt ill at ease, felt like she did when she was sidling up to an anxiety attack.

Why would he say that?

She knew her eyes were wide, her lips parted as she panted quietly, suddenly trying to catch her breath, though she had not moved an inch.

He had to be joking, he had to be stupid, had to be dreaming (and everything, and boundless) - Her thoughts were conflicting, and thunderous.

Joyce felt removed from the moment, felt her mind race as it left her standing there, and she pulled her hand away from his, grasping behind her until she felt the frame of the door.

Maybe she really was going to slam the door in his face, Jim thought.

"Joyce," His voice cracked, a hint of hysteria there, as he watched her implode on herself. Joyce looked harried, spooked, and wild-eyed in a way that wasn't so endearing as normal. It was concerning. Jim could feel the anxious energy absolutely throbbing off of her.

Her eyes seemed to say what her words did not - Why would you say that? Jim read it in her demeanor, with certainty.

Shit.

"Joyce, no, I,-" He took a step back, a little familiar with what she needed in overwhelming moments. Space. Time. Air. "Forget I said anything. Never mind, seriously - Shit."

Joyce's palms were flat on the door, and she pressed her back against

it, the cold numbing her fingertips, her skin tight in the dry air.

How could he - How could he say it? How could he say it like that, with naked, earnest honesty, and not - Not feel the ground fall out from under him?

The ground was falling out from under her.

Joyce, she...God. She couldn't. She couldn't formulate the thoughts, couldn't say it - How could he say it? This was - it was immense, it was - (too much.)

She was trying to slow her heart rate, trying to tune into her senses - Feel the cold, smell the air, hear the boards creek beneath him a few feet away from her - It brought her back, it centred, and calmed her. Grounded her.

She was here. Jim was here. They were here, together. Will was inside. El was inside. They were sleeping. Jonathan was with Nancy. There had been no monsters in almost two months. It was almost 1985.

Her coat itched against her neck, and she smelled their most recent cigarette clinging to her hair. She was okay. Jim was here.

Hopper.

The only person I wanna be with is you.

Somehow it was - It was the newest, most absurd thing she had ever heard, so surprising, and startling that, well, she was near panicking. But so too was it...familiar. It was familiar, and it was welcoming - It was an easy, quiet, return after many years away. To marry hearing this from present-day Hopper, when she had heard it 20 years ago from her Hopper, was...difficult, at the moment. Connecting the dots, finding her way back...Joyce felt like it was a lot to ask of her, right now.

But, fuck, she so badly wanted to. She so badly wanted to emerge from the fog of grief and guilt, and have it all fall into place. Tears pricked her eyes as she thought of him touching her like he had earlier, but every day. At the thought of coming home to him - At the

thought of not having to worry about hiding anything, about being sad, or anxious, over all that had transpired, because Jim knew. It could be - fuck - it could be easy, Joyce thought. Even when it was hard, with Jim...hard would be easy.

Joyce wanted to cry, run, and scream. And she wanted to kiss him. She had not wanted to kiss Jim Hopper in so very long.

Joyce had never planned big for herself when she was young, but she dreamed...she dreamed so big, and her dreams were lush, rich, and colourful. She dreamed with Hopper. They were off and on in high school, but they were always serious. It didn't matter if they were back together for a week or a year, they were hot and heavy and serious. So they dreamed.

It was easier to dream than plan against the circumstances that bound her to the small town. Poverty, grades not quite high enough for any scholarships, or great success - And just a general belief that she couldn't do anything right, and she wasn't smart enough to live, or work, anywhere but Hawkins.

No, she never planned, never sat down and figured it all out one night in senior year, but she dreamed - Then, and she still did now. It got her through.

Hopper asked her to come with him - Just once, and it was the summer before senior year, on a quiet night with a couple of beer in Benny's back yard. Jim was going to leave Hawkins, and at the time it was vague - He didn't know to do what, or to go where, but he was leaving, and he asked her to come with him, wherever he ended up.

Joyce had smiled with watery eyes, and kissed him, in lieu of an answer. She would go with him, whole-heartedly, if, when the time came, he still wanted her to. But she wasn't going to anchor him down, and plan it out, a whole year ahead of time. She wasn't going to be his regret.

That was just something she tucked away, quiet and precious, to see if it came up again.

It went astray, as these things tend to do at seventeen. But there was some real, breathing part of her heart that was alive, young, and whole, because once upon a time Jim Hopper had wanted her, and he wanted her to leave Hawkins - With him. It was something she clutched inside of herself, so close, and so dear, and she hardly ever brought it out.

Because she had compartmentalized it so well, Joyce barely remembered that, hey, this was him - This was the same Jim Hopper who loved her at seventeen, who held her so gently, but kissed her so deeply, big hands combing completely through her hair.

He was the same Jim Hopper who called her on her wedding day, determined to throw one last wrench into her and Lonnie. He asked if she was sure, and when she stayed silent on the phone, she heard a choked groan from his end of the receiver. Joyce told him she was sorry, and Jim said that he loved her - what she thought was - one last time. She wondered all these years if she broke Jim Hopper's heart.

She broke her own fucking heart. Marrying Lonnie. Lonnie was too careless, and too reckless, with her heart in the first place. She never gave him enough of her heart to break. No, she was firmly in charge of her own heartache.

They were so stupid back then, and maybe right through until now.

Though, things had changed so much in the last year, or so. And how.

For Jim, of course, things had changed when he lost it all. He lost Sara, and then he lost himself those years between, to pills, booze, self-loathing, sex, and all the kinda vices you see in the movies.

Joyce had to remind herself, sometimes, to be a little gentle with him. He was the big man, Chief of police, punch-throwing hero, but so too was he someone forever changed by that loss. He was hurting during those drunk, womanizing years, after he came back to Hawkins, and he was hurting now - But just had better support now, Joyce liked to think.

In a lot of big ways, being with Joyce, being around her family, and now raising El...it felt like a reawakening, a rebirth, an oddly delayed homecoming. He had lived in Hawkins those years after Sara, but he didn't care about them - He couldn't tell you where he went, who he fucked, what he owed in various bar tabs on this, and the other side, of the state line.

He was in a stupor, a haze, feet firmly planted on rock fuckin' bottom, and Joyce was his - Shit. She was some anxiety-riddled, tenacious saviour of his, subtle in some ways, but consuming in others. She saved him - quite literally.

It was overwhelming.

And yes, the same Jim who loved her at seventeen, was the same one who saved Will last year. And Joyce saved Jim. Odd, cyclical occurrences. They were here again. This was him.

Yes, there was Bob. Yes, it was beyond anything, it was tragedy, and guilt, and an aching, ugly, brutal, unfair loss - But, so too had there been Hopper.

Foremost.

How was she here again, with Jim Hopper?

Put it back together, Joyce, she told herself as she reeled in. Confront it, and put it back together. Because, before there was Lonnie - before there was any such thing as a Byers family - and a lifetime before Bob Newby - There was Jim.

Joyce and Jim.

You can have this.
He believed you.

Joyce inhaled deeply. The air smelled smoky and cold, and it was cleansing. Her face tingled as she flushed, clashing with the cold air. Joyce knew she couldn't have it both ways, couldn't have the time she needed, and also have Hopper at her side, in her house, in her bed.

She knew that, but it didn't mean she couldn't like the build up, couldn't want the attention, affection, and desire she was only realizing she had missed from Jim, and Jim alone. If she were only slightly less moral of a woman she would say to hell with all of it, but she still felt vaguely sick with the conflict inside her head, and heart.

"Do you really want me to forget you said it?" Joyce murmured, and she might have tried to smile, but it came across as more of grimace. She was uncomfortable, keyed up, excited, and devastated all at once.

It's okay to want this.

"Well shit, Joyce, which is it?" He rubbed his bearded chin, and managed to sound worried, exasperated, and good-natured in one breath.

"I didn't ask for any of it, Hop." Joyce cast her gaze to her feet. Her eyes were still wide, and she felt it must seem off-putting, as she tried to steady this moment between them.

She didn't want to scare him off (she had never scared him off.)

"Didn't you?" Jim said, a bitter laugh mingling with his sigh. She knew this version of Jim, too, the one who would lash out at nothing.

"What is that supposed to mean?" She cried, looking up again, and he didn't mean to blame her, or anything, he just knew they both felt this so much.

He knew she had been aware of it, too, and he couldn't handle thinking he was alone in these feelings.

"Nothing," He scrubbed a hand over his face again, habitually, his anxious tic, and she could not see his eyes for the shadow of his hat, for his heavy brow. "Just - You must know how this feels," He gestured to them, to the house - To the dynamic.

"I do know how it feels, and it's,-" Joyce shook her head, not quite noticeably, just instinctively pumping the brakes on this whole goddamn thing.

"What?" Jim prodded, baiting her, and he sounded cocky for someone who shivered in the cold, who sounded a little shrill from the

intensity of the night.

"A problem, don't you think?" Joyce said matter-of-factly.

"I dunno, Joyce." Jim shrugged, he was stubborn, though so was Joyce, but he wasn't about to surrender, swallow his pride, not just yet.

"Jim. I just," Joyce frowned, her face scrunching up, her wild hair shaking as one, strands stiff in the frigid air.

Jim turned away from her, hands on his hips, and shoulders squared up. He was trying to calm himself down, or convince himself to walk away, Joyce figured.

She didn't know what was happening. She didn't want to fight, she didn't want him to be angry at her. But they couldn't...rush it. Their fucking timing...

Maybe it wasn't rushing it to Jim, though. Maybe it was...finally for Jim. Huh. It was all pretty clear, she supposed.

"Hey," She said softly, and it seemed to dawn on her, slowly, quietly, gently. Understandingly.

Jim always thought Joyce was real graceful when it came to handling other people's vulnerability, and her selflessness, her nurturing nature overpowered the panic his confession had provoked.

Joyce pushed herself away from the door, taking a shaky breath. Jesus, they were both messes, both pushing and pulling on the other, both overwhelmed, and trying to support the other through their own breakdown.

She reached up, touching Jim between his shoulder blades, so softly he could barely feel it through his thick coat. She rubbed her hand there, across the scratchy material, and trailed it down to his side, so that her arm was around him, just barely reaching to grasp his waist. She molded herself against him, hugging her other arm around his front, and she was as wrapped up into him as she could be. Joyce hoped it meant something to him, that she was reaching out for him, first, that she was touching him, unprompted.

Joyce looked at him, stretching her neck up, though Jim stared steadfastly ahead. The moonlight twinkling off the soft mounds of snow caught in his eyes, and she could see a hint of that blaze of blue.

"I think I get it, Hop," She said, and the only indication he heard her was the clench of his jaw, flare of his nostrils, a soft exhale. His hands were still on his hips, and it made her embrace a little awkward - The whole thing was a little awkward, so it fit.

"I don't wanna seem like an opportunist, Joyce, taking advantage of Bob's death." Jim grumbled, realizing that, yeah, she was coming wise to his feelings about the situation.

"Of course not, but it's still - Your chance, right? Just because...I get it...Just because to me it's kinda soon, and sudden...to you..." Joyce trailed off, and she was still staring up at him, watching him very much avoid her eyes. She squeezed her arms round him tighter.

"I didn't just suddenly wake up yesterday thinkin' this." Hopper agreed on a groan, maybe embarrassed, rubbing the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.
Neither had Joyce.

"No," Joyce breathed, and this would be nearly romantic if it wasn't so tense, if they weren't playing with such delicate fire. She could be taken by him if it weren't for the jagged valley down her heart.

"And it's been a goddamn practice in restraint." He dropped his hand, hanging limp at his side, making no move to acknowledge that the diminutive woman was clinging to him.

Joyce mused, well, there had not been much restraint on this evening.

"Hopper...it's not like I didn't feel it, or think it...realize it, but,-"

"I went off the grid." He cut in, as they had discussed earlier, and she sensed that he blamed himself for the missed chance, and Joyce hated that there was any blame at all.

The circumstances of her and Jim reuniting last year were

catastrophic, were stressful, and unnatural - There was no right way to do this (any of it), and Joyce would tell him just that when he would get real down on himself.

"A bit, yeah - And I know why now, I know it was for El, our safety but,-" She appreciated, rather than found it irritating, that he finished her sentences, because it just meant what she had always known - What she had felt each time they were together since they searched for Will last year - That they were in tune, in sync, ebbing and flowing together in a way that was symbiotic and supportive.

"Then there was Bob." Jim said, and Joyce watched his lips form the words in the silver lighted night, waited on bated breath until he finally met her eyes, and it was palpable. It was there (it had always been there), and she found herself craning up, found herself leaning almost all of her weight against his side, giving herself to him.

"So I had distractions, I had...companionship, and so did you, just...it was a kid you were raising in secret..."

"Yeah, and it wasn't distraction enough to let it go, or get over it, you and..." Bob hung unsaid in the air. "And seeing you with El, hell, Joyce, it kills me." He twisted his mouth to one side, inhaling, his strong chin crumpled.

Joyce felt startled at the vulnerability that she had correctly perceived from him, but she felt good about it, too, she felt like she had been right about Jim Hopper all this time. That the big, bad, scary Chief had a heart just as big was - was so important, and so in line with the Hopper she grew up with.

"Jim." Joyce reached up with one hand, and her cold fingers touched the warm, humid skin of his neck. It seemed like he was reacting to her wrapped around him.

"I mean it. She comes to life around you. It was a big, loud click seeing you two together again." Jim grabbed her hand from his neck, the cold of her touch making him squirm. He kissed two fingertips, and grasped her arm back around his middle, sliding it into his open coat, holding it there, warming her instantly. It was a simple gesture but also so stunningly intimate that Joyce's knees shook a little.

"Jesus, Hop." Joyce murmured, and he pulled her tight against him, suddenly greedy for her close presence, for the shared body heat.

He was finally returning her desperate embrace fully now. He wasn't admitting total defeat, he wasn't completely giving in to her - Because he knew this wasn't headed where he wished, he knew she was priming him for the letdown. He was helpless, he was powerless, and couldn't push her away.

Jim would take whatever she gave. He craved her closeness, and he'd hang right on until she told him to go away.

Once he realized how much he had missed her between all those muddled, tragic, lost years...he couldn't pull back from it. He was devoted, dedicated, loyal to the bone to Joyce Byers, and they both knew that some part of him had always been, and would always be. It was everything. It was an utterly dark kismet, a connection born in youth, young love, and solidified through tragedy - Through loss, need, support, and mutual respect, goddammit.

"It hasn't been long enough, Jim." Joyce whispered, and she could feel his fingertips dragging through the ends of her hair, and she felt small, and sad as she said it.

"I know, Joyce - I'm not - Hell, y'know? It still gets to me, too, and it will. The nightmares..." He squeezed his arm back across her shoulders, a reflex to feeling her tense up.

"I think I'll feel better when I start sleeping more." Joyce said quietly, pondering aloud, knowing that to heal was not linear, that there was no clear finish line to the chaos they had been through.

"The only thing that really helps is knowing the kids are okay, happy..." Jim said, and his voice was tight.

"Yes," Joyce agreed, finding her eyes drifting closed as she almost allowed herself to be comforted by the company in misery.

"And that you're in our lives." Jim added, and she had to stop herself from shaking her head again. She didn't want to dissuade him, but this was fast becoming harder than it had to be.

The conversation drifted off, reaching a natural end, even if it was very much a beginning of a bigger dialogue. Joyce wasn't sure what time it was now, probably close to midnight, and hopefully not after, because that would mean Jonathan was late.

It was funny, though, how she worried just a little bit less when Hopper was around. She was a little more laid back around Jim, a little more irresponsible (which was still very much responsible) than when she was left to her own neurotic devices.

No, this wouldn't be so bad, Joyce thought.

Some minutes passed, and Jim gently removed his limbs from Joyce, and she belatedly released her arms from around him, too, a bit stiff from the cold, and holding him so damned tight. She felt the loss as a lump in her throat, and Joyce wondered if he could hear her breath stutter.

He wasn't leaving, the slowness in his purposeful movements seemed to say. Joyce felt the air around them shift, felt it crack, and forgot about the cold as Jim descended the couple of steps on her porch, and turned to face her. It didn't put them close to even height, but it leveled the playing field just a bit. She could see into his eyes without straining, she could see the seriousness in his strong jaw, his expanding chest. He was vibrating on a different level now, Joyce realized.

What...what had they been talking about? What was all the fuss about? Joyce was fast forgetting herself as her cheeks heated under his gaze. He flipped some switch, and he was - Oh. He was charming, Joyce remembered, and he was handsome, and he had some agency over both of those things that was dizzying. One may not recall these things about him until he wanted you to, and then it was...so...pleasant, and so apparent.

It was apparent to Joyce.

"Y'know, Joyce," That...that was a tone she hadn't - Oh. She had heard it before, but not in a long, long time. It was...gruff in the warmest, honeyed way. It was alluring.

"It's not just," He was speaking in fragmented sentences.

Joyce stepped closer to him on the porch, funny that she could barely hear him on a night when every sound was amplified through the winter air. Her toes teetered over the top step, and Jim had one foot on the next step up, the other straight behind him on the bottom one, sort of...positioning himself, leaning close.

"It's not just about my emotions," Jim said, and Joyce was listening so intently, so caught up that she might be about to miss what was coming. Her delicate brows furrowed, and she bit her bottom lip, her perfect, pretty nose pink with the cold, too. She was getting to him.

She had gotten to him.

"Huh? Hop, what - What d'you mean?" She asked, and he let her, smiling that sweetly smug smile, his lips parted as he watched every little movement, and expression, she made.

Yeah, there was that, Jim thought, and he remembered how soft was her skin, how long were the legs of such a petite woman.

"It's this, too, y'know, Joyce," Their eyes met as he said her name, and Jim slid his teeth over his own bottom lip, finding himself propelled forward, lured in by everything that was she. "It's the wanting you." He said as a low rumble, nothing bashful about him.

Joyce's stomach tumbled suddenly, soaring with a bud of arousal. She could feel how much warmth he was giving off, before he folded down her collar, and buried his face in her neck, standing at an angle where he could do it just so.

Yes, that was the gaze, and the tone she indeed recognized from this man.

She didn't gasp until he opened his mouth against her skin, not kissing it but - But panting there, breathing onto the smooth, pale skin of her neck. Joyce - Jesus Christ, she wound her arms around his head and neck on impulse, not knowing how else to react but with want. Right, the wanting - She had forgotten about that until he wanted her to remember it, too.

Joyce flooded with a shaky, tingling warmth, and her cheeks burned, her centre throbbing at the dark desire he had thrown into the small space between them.

Jim clutched one big hand low on her back, keeping her steady in place, and the other crawled up her spine to thread into her hair, his palm gently grasping her scalp. He applied the slightest pressure, not really pulling, but guiding, and Joyce tilted her head to the side, her eyelids fluttering, breath coming in noisy puffs against his ear.

It was some small level of restraint, of control left in him. He was - He was taking her, and wanting her, but he wasn't doing so in a typical way, he wasn't devouring her with kisses like he was wont to do. This was Hopper trying to respect what they both needed.

"I want you, Joyce." He spoke against her neck, the words muffled with the way his mouth worked over her skin - hot, humid breath glancing it, neck prickling with goosebumps, and it was pure fire. She felt faint with sudden arousal at his words, clinging to him as a solid, warm anchor through the turbulence that was this.

Right, Joyce thought - Yeah, we - we did this, too. They were damned good at this part of it, she just - She never thought Jim would want her again. She thought herself damaged goods, but a low flame sprung back to life at his plain, pulsing attraction to her, and somehow this is what really did her in.

Jesus, he cared about her, and wanted her, and was touching her - She felt high on the ego with which that came. Even when they were young, and she had no shortage of come ons from classmates, Jim Hopper liking her, and finding her attractive was always oddly empowering to her. He was such a presence, such a form, that it must mean something if he wanted to touch her like this.

Joyce felt his tongue, warm and wet, press against her skin, and it laved there greedily. His mouth suctioned a little bit more, until her hands wound in his hair, and she was grappling against him, moving her hips toward nothing, as he kept his lower body angled away. He tongued his way up her neck, his teeth pulling pliant skin just once, until he reached her jaw, and placed one, small, chaste kiss on that sharp line. Joyce moaned aloud at the fluttering shots of excitement

in her tummy, and out.

God almighty, if he didn't know exactly what he was doing to her. It would be almost manipulative if it wasn't so thoroughly fucking hot.

Jim pulled back, a little breathless, not able to hide his aroused panting. His lips were wet, and Joyce's neck shone where Jim had just been, though it dried quickly as the dull cold crept back in.

"What?" Joyce inquired with a gasp, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she tried to calm down. He was staring at her, and there was a gentleness filtering back into his gaze. Jesus Christ, if he wasn't smooth.

"Just wanna remember what you look like after I touch you." Said he, and it sounded like a dirty little vow, a future promise.

What she looked like was pink all over, flushed from her hairline to all he could see of her chest. Her hair was wilder than before, if possible, and he could see the curve of her breast in the way she breathed so deep. She looked loved, she looked wanton, and it was worth remembering.

But they were still here, on her step in the depressing winter, and Joyce was trying to make a decision, any decision, when the lights from Jonathan's car gleamed up the driveway.

Decision made, she figured, and Jim turned it off as quick as he had turned it (and Joyce) on. He casually dug his hands into his coat pockets, kicking the wooden stair a little, watching the toe of his boot bounce off of it.

He was giving her a head start in collecting herself, willing to greet Jon first. Somewhere beneath the whole romance novel, light of the moon, heaving bosom thing Joyce felt a surge of real, solid affection for him, and for it there might even be another word.

8. long time running

Thank you for all of the comments & conversation on this story. I tried to reply to most individually, and I thank you again! Without anyone reading, I wouldn't feel so compelled to write. But this hiatus, y'all...

This is kind of a boring, transition chapter - But it feels good to get something out of your drafts, so you can proceed!

Oh, and can we call it artistic license that I gave Hopper a phone at the cabin? Lol.

"Play it cool, Joy," Jim ribbed, trying to lighten her apprehension, as she clenched her hands at her sides, eyes wide, neck blooming with the slightest pink from the friction of his beard. "He's the teenager."

Wouldn't know it, Joyce thought, especially considering how much she wanted Hopper to continue his deed, how much she wished they were both young again, before any kids, and she could haul him into her bedroom.

Shit. She forgot about this specific draw Jim had over her. The wanting you...

It was funny how much he could sway her, at times. It was funny how Joyce could completely miss something until Jim decided she shouldn't - Until he decided to remind her what the physical side of their relationship had been like, and suddenly Joyce was rethinking every move she had made the last year (ten years, twenty years...).

More and more, it felt like the interludes they had with their spouses, their flings, girlfriends, boyfriends, were just that - Interludes. It felt like Joyce was finally coming back, it felt like this could be - Oh. It made her emotional if she considered it, because it felt like he could be a pillar to her, again - Like the two of them, together, could be the foundation on which they rebuilt their broken selves.

It could be so good, Joyce thought to herself, and she felt unshed

tears prick her eyes for the umpteenth time that night.

Damn the timing all to hell.

"Hey Chief," Jonathan said, off-handed, distracted, ascending the steps, reminding Joyce of such timing. He was not concerned at the scene on the porch in the slightest, though, and she was thankful.

Hopper had been around so often in the last few weeks, that it wasn't unusual for them to be sharing a smoke on the porch, even in the wee hours.

"Jon." Jim nodded to her son, and he was so laid-back so quickly, that Joyce was, too. Things calmed, any tension imperceptible - Joyce's breathing slowed, and she felt steady.

This is important, she thought - That he could ease a heady situation into tranquility. Though, she knew there was another side to Jim - The one that could combust, but she was trying to see the positives about this situation.

Jonathan didn't even really look up when the Chief spoke to him, as he stashed a book into his rucksack.

"Hey sweetie." Joyce said, grasping his arm as he strode by, returning from whatever him and Nancy Wheeler were involved in (conspiracies, romance, studying?).

"Hi Mom," Jonathan smiled, and started to open the door. "They asleep in there?"

"Yeah, but nothing wakes them when they're that tired - Don't worry."

"Alright. 'Night Mom, Chief." They murmured their goodnights back, the heat between them sapped out of the air.

The cold returned, and they kept a respectable distance, not daring to wrap up together again with all kids accounted for.

"Guess I should go rouse El." Jim said, hand rubbing the back of his neck, the attempt to re-establish boundaries, and quickly, feeling a bit clumsy.

Joyce had to smile, as she felt her skin tingle, a little tender from where his beard had rubbed as he devoured her neck, moments before. Boundaries, indeed.

"Really, Hop - Let her stay. I don't work until late tomorrow, I'll be here." She offered again, genuinely - She wanted him to know that nothing would change in her love for El, no matter what happened between them, two old flames.

Jim thought about turning her down again, but he could use the time to brood. He didn't...like to be alone, but tonight he just wanted to sit in silence and drink his beer, and watch a mindless sitcom while he drowned out the loudness of their predicament. El always had a lot of questions after they left Joyce's, so that could be left for tomorrow.

"She can be an unpleasant creature when woken," Jim muttered jokingly, digging the pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. "You sure?"

"I'm sure." Joyce nodded.

"Call me if you need a break?" He had the smoke lit. Such a tall, broad figure in the dark was he. Foreboding, if he weren't so very much her partner in crime.

"It'll be fine, Hop."

Jim smoked in silence for a couple of minutes, taking long drags, holding for a beat on the inhale, letting it really calm him. He could use a stiff drink in the other hand, really.

"Joyce...You know I'm not still like that, the way I was after...Sara, after I came back to town. I wasn't always about that," He took his hat off as he spoke, left the cigarette hanging loose between his lips, and ran a hand through thinning sandy hair.

It was uncomfortable for him to confront that version of himself, that behaviour, and Joyce could see it in the way his whole face crumpled at his own words. It wasn't something he would admit to even himself - It was only something he'd bring up to Joyce, because he felt she deserved reassurance about, well, him (she didn't need it, but she appreciated it).

"I was your boyfriend, once," Jim continued, and Joyce almost wrinkled her nose at this, biting her lip instead.

Boyfriend? She supposed it was accurate - She had loved him with all of the tunnel-visioned passion that a young woman loves a boyfriend, but they always seemed...beyond those labels. She loved him. She was with him. They were together (then, now, always). Boyfriend, girlfriend? Is that what they'd been, all those years ago? That time from high school that bled into the hazy, strange, first years of their twenties? Yes, if they were using specific terms, that was true.

"I was Diane's husband - I was Sara's father. I wasn't always a loose cannon - That wasn't me, y'know? That was reactionary, that was,-" He was gesticulating broadly, trying to pluck the words out of the night air to describe what he had been through, and how it had crushed the life out of him, too.

It was grief, it was a downward spiral in the face of the worst tragedy in a parent's life. Joyce got it, yup. She did, she knew. He didn't need to put it into words, but she found it completely heartening that he was trying so hard (he had been trying for a long time again, hadn't he?).

"Hey," Joyce grabbed his elbow suddenly, ceasing his motions, the other hand reaching up to brush against his stubbly cheek, drawing his nearly frantic gaze back to hold hers.

"I know - I do know. I promise, Hop, it's not - It's not about that. I know who you are, and what you're made of. I'm giving you all the credit you deserve, okay? I promise." Her thumb brushed down his face, running along his jaw line, until his eyes warmed, and softened.

Joyce could see grey hair glimmering among his blonde in the cool light of the moon. It spoke of the years between them, and it was nice, more than anything. Reassuring, somehow.

"Okay," Jim said on an exhale, and he took her hand from his face, kissing her palm. Joyce's chest clenched with overwhelming affection at the gesture, while his eyes searched hers, looking for an answer to a question he hadn't yet asked.

She drew him in with just a look, expressive eyes hypnotizing him. Lines of concern were hidden on her forehead by her bangs, but written in the way she bit her lip. He believed in everything that was lingering between them. He felt confident in their history, he felt certain he made the right choice by coming here today. He didn't know why - He just did. He thrived off of the goodness that radiated from her, and he felt god damn hopeful, against every instinct.

Joyce eased his worries, soothed his ego, and Jim didn't know if she was returning the sentiments, or letting him down easy - She was so good at breezing by the hard stuff, and it was fine, it was all he needed (whatever she gave him was all he needed).

"Okay." He said again, a finality to his tone, a slight nod of his head. He took another drag from his smoke, and passed it to Joyce, who eagerly puffed away on it, the harshness of the inhale not bothering her for once. She needed something harsh to pull her back down.

"You won't...hold it against me, if..." Joyce spoke again, not quite finished. Her lips pursed as she quickly exhaled a steady stream of smoke.

"If I need some time?" Her voice was quiet, less sure than it was through most of their evening together. She looked down at her feet. This softened Jim's gaze further, and he observed her closely in the moment.

"I've never held a thing against you in my life." Jim murmured almost reflexively, too quick to give it much consideration, unable to pull his gaze away from her lips as she smoked his cigarette. He didn't even know if it was true. He wanted it to be, he wanted to provide nothing but support, and strength for Joyce, wanted to erase all the bitterness of the past. So he said it, and, well, he would mean it in future, if he hadn't done it in the past.

"Well, that's not true," Joyce scoffed good-naturedly. "Lonnie is only one example."

"Fair enough, hey?" Jim rubbed a hand down his face, some of the angrier memories from their youth flooding back to him. They'd both held a hell of a lot against each other, actually, but it didn't seem that

way when he looked at her. When he looked at her? He couldn't imagine that they were ever apart, or why. That was thanks to the blurry, romantic lens of nostalgia, he supposed.

"You got me. But nothing to stop me from caring about you." This surprised Joyce, a little, though not enough to react.

She - She hadn't known that, hadn't thought she was still on Jim Hopper's radar at all after a couple of years apart. She didn't really think he hated her, but figured she became an irrelevant figure of his past, with enough time. Joyce had carried some belief that she wasn't good enough for him, after he left. He must have changed, must have wanted someone more sophisticated than Joyce believed was she, though this spoke more of her own insecurities, than anything concrete.

Joyce never thought that he ever thought about her in the big city, or during his marriage to Diane (she was wrong). Joyce knew he thought about her before, during, and after 'Nam, because that was the epicentre of their breakdown, and break-up.

"Thanks, Hop." Joyce finally replied, appreciatively, as he started backing away from the step, and backing away from her. They smiled at each other through the dark, though Joyce felt a little sad - A little dejected, though far from rejected. Just emotionally hung out to dry, and needing space from the one person who could comfort her.

"See you soon, yeah?" She called, wanting to cling to their time together tonight - Not wanting him to leave, whilst knowing he must. He just nodded, non-committal.

They had danced around enough baggage tonight. They had dug up the corpses of their past - Their love, failures, losses, desires - The decay was left strewn around them, so that there was no room left to broach anything else tonight.

It was enough - They had talked, and touched, enough for tonight. He needed to go home - Really, he should take the kid - Be level-headed and responsible, and not pawn her off on the woman he had just lay a heavy emotional weight, but shit if he wasn't selfish. Shit if he didn't want to leave, pop an ibuprofen, drink a beer, turn the

television on, and jerk off thinking about Joyce fucking Byers.

It wasn't noble, but he was buzzing from the unfinished excavation, the god damn implication of all they'd almost said, from the feel of her skin on his, the pulsating heat he'd felt when Joyce tried to move closer to him as he licked her pale, soft skin.

He thought he was in love with her, and Jim had to go home.

So, Joyce saw him off from her doorstep, finishing the cigarette he left between her fingers. She looked very nearly ghostly, as he climbed into the Blazer, while she stood there in a plume of smoke, and vapour from her breath in the cold, blue night. A tingling chill crawled up his scalp as he looked back at her once more, a soft silhouette that he'd know anywhere.

There was something finite about it, Joyce thought, as she wrapped her arms around herself against winter's touch. It was one of the last nights of '84, and Joyce couldn't find it in her to even mind the lung-aching, frigid air. It was something to mark it, something to remember, something to book-end this hellish year. She would remember how cold it was in December of '84, and she would remember Jim Hopper in her kitchen as she heated the house.

But finite, indeed. Normally, Hop would just come, and go. She would be too preoccupied, or distracted, to fully welcome, or say goodbye to him. It was about their kids, about the homework, meals, work, and the recovery, and grief. Joyce didn't have to stand and watch him go, because he would always be back. The half-assed normalcy they had fallen into the last few weeks was as simple and comforting, as it was unsustainable, and terse.

And, truly, she was on the nose with the way it felt - For, she did not see Jim Hopper again until a warm, bustling April morning.

Joyce didn't go to the party in the woods on New Year's Eve. She told Will and Jonathan that she made plans to go ring in midnight at the Wheeler's, when in actuality she stayed home, shut the lights off, and had a quiet night. She might spin a Tom Waits record, or two. A little Bob Seger if she wasn't feeling too low down.

She didn't want the boys to worry, there was no reason to worry - She just needed peace, and quiet. The last two months had been so loud with loss, stress, trauma.

The other night with Jim was the loudest of all, bringing to the surface so much for which she wasn't ready. She had barely begun thinking about Jim as a romantic link again, and then in the same night to think of - of being with him, of him touching her like he had - It was potent, it was more than she dreamed she would ever have with him again.

It was more than she could have with him, right now.

So, Joyce rang in 1985 alone at home, the lights from the Christmas tree lending some warmth to the room. It was a frosty night, and she felt it through the thin walls. She thought of Jim as she pulled on a second pair of socks, knowing he would hate that she was sitting home self-sacrificing once again.

Well, she supposed she didn't ring in 1985 doing exactly that. Because at four minutes to midnight her phone rang. The red wine she'd had over the evening had dulled her nerves to a manageable hum, so she answered the phone with less panic than on a normal night close to midnight.

"Knew you were home." Was Jim's greeting as she answered with a soft hello.

"Yeah," Joyce said with a nod, though she hadn't really intended to hide it from him. "Don't tell Will, hmm? The boys don't need to know."

"I won't." She heard a great muffling on the other end, and the background noise of the party grew quieter. She imagined he pulled the phone closer to the door.

"Is everything going okay?"

"Yup," Jim said, and she heard him inhale, and direly wished she was beside him, sharing the cigarette he must be smoking. "What 'bout there?"

"Yup." Joyce echoed, softly, gently. She didn't have to keep up appearances for him. She knew he didn't believe her, but it didn't matter. It was easy.

"Wish you were here," Jim said, and she could tell it was in that way where he barely opened his mouth, the words grumbling passed pouted lips.

"Me, too."

"I understand why you're not," He sounded understanding, but almost begrudgingly so. Like he wished he had it in him to question her choice not to show (he didn't).

"I knew you would." It was a callback to Joyce's understanding of Jim's retreat last year raising El. He knew she'd understand - She knew that he would. It was...relieving to have that.

They stayed quiet for the last few seconds of '84, and Joyce was the one to murmur first, with more affection in her voice than she intended, "Happy New Year, Hop."

"Happy New Year, Joyce." She couldn't help but smile, imagining him pulling the phone cord, struggling with the simple intimacy of the conversation, though they were so far apart - But being in his ear was enough to make the tips of them both burn.

Jim shuffled again, she heard his hand brush against the receiver, and figured he moved back into the heart of the party. He let her listen for a couple of minutes, to the maniacally happy teens stuffed into his little cabin in the woods, and she thought she could decipher Will's happy hollers to a new year.

That was all she needed, and this Jim knew.

9. cold one

This chapter became a behemoth, and it has been quite awhile since I updated, which I hadn't realized! I feel like I might be spinning down a path where this is...too canon compliant lol? So that it's maybe boring, because I'm not venturing enough - But that is what I have always liked about writing fanfiction, is trying to elaborate on what could be true to canon - I am not good at my own plot, so I just like to expand lol! In any case - Here it is. It was a bit of an experimentation for me, too - The timeline of this chapter jumps around a bit - I tried, I am not sure how cohesive it is, so I apologise if the execution is clumsy. I'm excited for the next chapter, and to wrap this up for these two lonesome souls.

Thank you DEARLY for all of the comments & conversations surrounding my story, and others, as well as Jopper in general. Through dark times it has seen me.

When Joyce hung up from Hop, she had much to consider. She knew that Will was in good hands - She could have tonight to decompress.

She knew that if...if they were going to act like adults about it, if she was going to...confront what Jim meant to her - She had to work through some things. This was plain, this was necessary - There was no jumping into anything (more than they had.)

If there was ever going to be anything, she had to deal with it, because otherwise she could just real easily withdraw, close off...lose him completely. Joyce lost him completely all those years back, and yet...

She had to have the foresight in working through her grief, the trauma over Will's possession, to know that how she got through it was going to completely impact what became of her relationship with Hopper.

Joyce desperately did not want to lose him, and worried she would put too much pressure on herself to get over the hump - It wasn't

linear, it wasn't like that, though. She couldn't put a timeline on it, so how could she know when she'd feel healed enough to - To what? Be with Hopper? It sounded so strange, even to herself.

She was still in awe of the year before, how Jim pulled up to her side, and helped her soldier on through Will's disappearance. She still could hardly believe the total turnaround he did. The supportive, eager, incredible partner in crime she found in him through their search. The demons he cast aside to help her, to save Will.

Jim Hopper pumped life back into her son one short year ago, and Joyce wished she had stood still long enough in the months after to really see him, and the profundity of it - To maybe let herself love him, even then.

She was overcome with it when she thought about it now. By saving Will, Jim helped give back to Joyce one half of her world. How - How did she ever look passed him, to see Bob? It was, perhaps, a cruel thought, but it was something that gave Joyce pause.

It was impressive, how Jim faded into the background after Will was home, because then El needed him, and he needed to keep everyone safe by flying under the radar. If Joyce had paid closer attention she might have questioned it, but of course Jim didn't want her to look too closely, to wonder too much. It was skillfully done, really, but that lost time...

There was also the hesitation, their memories of how this went when they were so much younger, how consuming was their relationship, but so, too, how they could push each other to the brink.

It was a fine line.

But, Joyce couldn't explain how enormous it was - Jim helping. When anyone asked her - They just seemed to think, you know, a cop doing his job.

Of course, no one knew all the details - But even that Hopper helped find Will when everyone else gave up, that he coached her through breathing for him, as Jim got his heart beating again - Even those basic, non-alternate dimension aspects, meant everything to Joyce.

It wasn't just doing his duty, not even the simpler parts. It was more than anything she could have expected. Chief of Police who lost his own daughter, went to the depths of hell to help find her son, and it was a reckoning, wasn't it? It was a chance of redemption, it was a chance for Hopper to course correct - It was saving Will, and it was saving Joyce from the same darkness into which Hopper had slipped four short years before.

He was still...so good, she realized near the end of the endeavour. He was loyal, and strong, beneath a grumbling, ill-tempered exterior. Maybe it was just for her, but there was a warmth, a steadiness, too.

It certainly wasn't all the time - He still only had patience when he really tried, he still shouted and huffed, but he looked at her differently by the end of it - Looked at her like she was as strong and steady as was he (Jim always knew she was strong, as Jonathan might recall to his mother one day).

Hopper had held his arms around her and Will as her boy breathed through that oxygen mask, and it was the first time in twenty years that Joyce had felt whole again. Saved, even.

The turnaround - Shit. It was overwhelming, and it was more than she could process last year, but it was significant.

Because, he had been an asshole - Which, Jim had always been a little bit of a mischievous asshole in their youth, but he had a charm that trumped any consequences to the shit he caused.

After losing Sara, he was more mean than charming, so it was not like Joyce could have expected him to...to believe her. He believed her, and they believed Terry, and - Jesus. Jesus. What a tangle it had been, what a miracle.

In the time that Jim had been back in Hawkins before Will went missing, Joyce had seen him around plenty. She spoke to him when the time called for it, but had specific interactions with him just a handful of times - But those times were enough to know he had changed, that he was broken, and sour.

In the first year he returned, the lowest point in it all, was their first

major re-connection. The night she drove over to his trailer after he came through Melvald's with sunglasses on well after dark, stinking of liquor, filled a prescription, bought beer, and left without a word. Maybe he didn't even know that it was Joyce that rang him in, he was in such a haze.

Joyce showed up on his doorstep later on, another six-pack in hand, because she was not there to judge his coping mechanisms. She was there to offer comfort - Their baggage, and his attitude, be damned.

Their history, his need, his loss was more important - And to each other, even then, they were such familiar shoulders on which to lean.

He leaned on hers that night, not really asking any questions, just choking out her name as she appeared in his doorway. Joyce held him, wrapped around him so tightly, as they stood on his deck, and he clutched her arms, and wept, staring out at the lake. He didn't remark about the bruises on her forearms, and she didn't remark about the dangerous path he was stumbling down.

It became decidedly less tender after that. He was always drunk or hung over, or high on barbiturates, it seemed. Joyce didn't blame him. She got it, even if she felt a knot in her stomach every time she saw him worse for wear.

He made mean jokes, he looked like shit, and he was at the same bar Lonnie frequented, way too late on week nights. He was falling, and Joyce could only watch from afar.

On the anniversary of Sara's death, he took weeks off of work on a whim. Joyce called Benny when she got word of this from Flo - She asked him to look out for the angry drunkard into which Jim Hopper had turned. She had too much on her plate with her own angry drunkard of a husband, and couldn't get dragged down by Jim Hopper. But, she was worried - Rightfully so, as was Flo, and anyone in his life who knew how good-hearted he was somewhere inside.

She did her duty - Benny looked out for him as friends do, and Jim ticked up a bit after this. He stayed at a low base level of darkness, but didn't have those manic spirals. He did his job, he bedded his women, and he stayed out of Joyce's line of sight, for the most part.

The most memorable of the times they interacted, and one of the last instances until Will went missing - Was a confrontation.

August '81

Fucking Lonnie, Joyce thought, as she pulled into the parking lot of the bar. He called her around 2 A.M., or attempted to - The bartender took over for her incoherent husband, and asked her to come pick him up. He wasn't causing shit tonight, just so drunk he was all but unconscious. He couldn't have found anyone to go home with, or lost all his money, and got too wasted in the process.

He was already sleeping on the couch in the weeks before this, and they were hardly speaking. Joyce was grateful when he was gone all night, most nights. She had almost completely washed her hands of him, with just a few i's to dot, and t's to cross.

But here she was, stuffing the dead weight of Lonnie into her little car. He stunk of sweat, hard liquor, and vaguely of sick - How damned charming, Joyce thought - What an idyllic little life.

She could not wait until she could kick his ass out once and for all. But until then, she didn't care if he stayed drunk and gone most of the time. She'd take him home tonight, sure, but he'd likely be gone by the time she woke in the morning. Fine by fucking her.

It was hot, one of those close, pulsing, summer nights. The humidity was going to drive her insane before Lonnie did, and that was saying something. She wore loose cotton shorts, and a white t-shirt to run this nightmare of an errand, and the feel of fabric on her overheated skin was making her even more irritable. She was struck with the impulse to wander into the middle of the street and scream, she was so goddamn frustrated.

Joyce clenched her jaw, and brushed her sweaty bangs back from her face, slamming the car door a little harder than necessary, though Lonnie didn't budge. Joyce gave a start when she noticed that Hopper had followed them outside.

Of fucking course.

He wore a faded short-sleeved denim shirt, black jeans, and no hat. His hair stuck up in whorls, and she found he looked threadbare in the neon glow of the lights from the bar. She couldn't remember Jim Hopper in the summertime, she realized.

There was no one else outside, last call was still about half an hour away - The music from the dive throbbed through the air - Nothing trendy, but good enough old rock n' roll to keep the regulars happy. Lonnie and Jim were both regulars, and wasn't that something to brag about?

She grabbed Hopper by the crook of his big arm, and steered him back toward the door in case Lonnie came to. Had they been in the same bar the entire night, for Jim to only notice, typical, when Joyce was on the scene?

Hopper started ranting, or tried to - She caught words here and there, as he ran his hands through his hair habitually, and she couldn't see his eyes, a shadow cast from his heavy brow when he looked down at her.

As drunk Jim tried to lecture Joyce about her drunk husband, her temper rose. She was already fucking hot, sticky, sweaty, her heart thrumming uncomfortably in the heat, and she felt her face burn, listening to the drunk Chief of Police try to shame her, and her situation.

She could have broken limbs in that moment. She could have smashed their two thick heads together.

Jim was no fucking better than Lonnie, he just didn't have a wife or kids waiting at home. But that was the whole point, wasn't it? He was doing it because he lost that wife, and kid. Lonnie was doing it despite the wife, and kids.

Jim had that up on Lonnie, she supposed. But he had fallen further than Lonnie had. Lonnie was never made of much, never destined for great things - He had drunk in his blood, whereas Jim constructed his downward spiral from grief. It was gut-wrenching, when it wasn't so

frustrating to watch.

"Not a good fuckin' look, Chief," Joyce told Jim as he finished a rambling, aggressive threat to arrest Lonnie, for no real reason that she could decipher.

The light caught his eyes, and they were narrow, and unfocused - There was a meanness about them, and plain and simple drunk, too.

"You can't put one foot in front of the other, let alone arrest anybody." She threw in, because if he was going to lecture her about drunk idiots, she was going to point out the biggest one she could see.

"You marrying him wasn't a good fuckin' look." Jim was never short on retorts, even when wasted. Get him in close enough proximity to Lonnie Byers, and he could argue until daylight on sheer will alone.

Jesus Christ, Joyce thought, her mouth dropping open a bit. He was unbelievable.

JESUS CHRIST, she wanted to scream at him. It had been fifteen years. Jim had been married, too - Jim had been through so much more than to worry that she married goddamn Lonnie Byers.

Hopper swayed on the spot, all broad, 6 foot-whatever of him. She'd let him fall like a fuckin' tree if he lost his balance, she already decided.

"Clever. Find a new bone to pick." Joyce said, instead of shouting him down, knowing it would be a waste of her energy.

She tore the car keys from her pocket, and felt the humid heat prickple unpleasantly across her skin with the motion. Her temper was short tonight, and rightfully so. She had two boys at home in bed, and was across town picking up their scumbag of a father, and dealing with her equally drunk, grieving, old flame - Seriously, a fairy-tale, Joyce thought.

"You don't want me to help you?" Jim said, barely coherent himself, and stumbling in the gravel parking lot.

Joyce looked up, glaring at him darkly. She could see the sweat across his face gleaming in the street lamps. He didn't look good. He looked on the verge of passing out himself. He looked pekid, and bloated.

"You want to help me?" There came the shouting. She couldn't contain it - He knew which buttons to push after all of these years, and Joyce boiled over, useless as it was.

"Look the fuck after YOURSELF, so if I ever do need you to arrest him you will be SOBER ENOUGH to manage it." She roared up at him, stopping short of poking her finger against his chest, as she would likely knock him over if she did, so unsteady was he.

And, she meant it - Really. It wasn't like Lonnie had never laid his hands on her. Jim had seen the evidence of it himself, soon after he came back to town. It's not like Jonathan had never snuck the phone into the closet and called the cops during a particularly bad row - It's not like it was outside the realm of possibility that Joyce might actually need his miserable ass arrested at some point.

Could Jim not see that? Could he not see what this looked like?

"I'm not like him, Joyce." He said, as if he read her thoughts. It was the most sober he sounded since she arrived.

She couldn't really look at him in any detail. She couldn't really accept that this was Hopper - It was the worst shape she had ever seen him in, ever, at any point in their history. It was alarming, it made her feel a little hysterical to witness him like this.

"I know you aren't, Jim, and that's why this is so hard to see." There was no reason to hold back - Both for the fact of who they were to each other, and that he would not likely remember it in the morning, anyway.

"Fuck you," Hopper snarled down at Joyce, a nerve clearly touched, as he wiped a hand over his upper lip to swipe the sweat away.

His skin tone was sallow, as if he hadn't eaten a vegetable or seen the sunshine in months - As if all he drank was beer, and all he ate were

pills.

"Hard to see is you walking around with bruises from that prick, and too much pride to leave."

"That's a low blow," Joyce said with a short, dark laugh, only because she was too angry to cry. "It has nothing to do with pride. Hell, Jim, I'm insulted you don't know me better than that. You gonna remember that one tomorrow? It might be the worst thing you've ever said to me."

"Doubt that's true." He shrugged, and she knew he was drunk, but she absolutely hated him in that moment.

She hated him for making her think there was no use, and no good in anything that she did - The world was gonna spit her up and chew her out, anyway, wasn't it? And how would she stop it from doing the same to her boys when their father was a fucking idiot, Hopper was a fucking idiot, was there any man in her life that wasn't? How was she going to raise her boys to be decent men, when she didn't know any decent men?

"Glad you're proud of yourself." Joyce walked away, hands clenched into fists. She would not cry about it until much later, when the pulsating anger, and humidity, had faded some.

"Ain't proud of a thing in my life anymore, Joyce." Jim shouted at her retreating back, his voice cracking.

If she didn't have Lonnie to get home and out of her face, this might break her. She might turn around, she might hold him like she held him when he first came back to town - Equally as broken then, just not quite so fucked up.

But she couldn't dig him out of his darkness, when she was drowning in her own. She wasn't going to be manipulated by his heartache, though it certainly amplified her own.

"Can't imagine you are, Jim." Joyce threw over her shoulder, quietly, but the signpost he kicked told that he heard her.

When Joyce got home, she cracked the windows, but left Lonnie

asleep in the car, because she officially couldn't fucking stand him.

And the next time she saw Jim, at any level beyond pleasantries at her till, was when Will got lost in the Upside Down.

Reflecting on that confrontation, just past midnight in '85...was bizarre for Joyce.

Joyce knew that Jim was not like Lonnie, and was not like all of the angry abusers of which her family was comprised, but that argument was not something she took lightly. It was not a moment she shrugged off, it was one she locked away. It was apart of the reason, now that she was thinking, that she could look passed Hopper to see Bob, even after Will's rescue. Because she had seen that side of him. Joyce had the right to be cautious.

But, oh he had...indeed, course corrected. He had improved, and confirmed that he was a man of substance - He was an asshole then, but he was still a decent man, and she was relieved at this reminder.

She had been to hell and back with Jim Hopper, in more ways than one, and wasn't...sure how they kept coming back to each other.

It must mean something that they could find their way back.

She hoped they would find their way back again, for the dark winter clutched Joyce deep in a fog of familiar anxiety, and depression.

It wasn't unexpected, considering the high from exorcising Will's demonic shadow monster, from welcoming El back into their lives, was diminishing slightly. The adrenaline from the ordeal was wearing off, some months later. The peace, the calm wasn't surprising to wake up to now. It had...settled, there was a bit of a routine to their lives again.

And that was nice. It was nice to feel safe, to know both Will and El were becoming happy and whole, though it was something they had to work for, and through. It was nice to see Jonathan come out of his shell around Nancy, to watch Jim navigate fatherhood the second time around.

But, it wasn't enough, either. The newness had kept Joyce on her toes, gave her a purpose - Something to work through, and figure out - Something to adjust to, help the kids adjust to - Find a rhythm in their daily life.

When it was time to relax into it all, when that rhythm and routine were established, the calm gave way to old worries, to half-healed wounds, and to unprocessed grief.

When Joyce finally felt like she could breathe again, the Christmas tree thrown out the back door, when the days were cold, short, and dark - Joyce blinked and realized she was heavy. Ah. This. Yes, this she knew.

She crawled into bed one afternoon, drew the curtains, pulled thick blankets over top her, and didn't really feel like she crawled out again until the springtime - Her spirit didn't, at least.

She still - existed, of course. A single mother didn't get to completely shut down, as grieving, broken, and depressed as she may be.

Joyce went to work and came home, helped with homework, worried and fretted, but she didn't quite have the energy. Some days she just went through the motions, after assuring the kids were okay.

Other times she had too much energy, but it was not the productive kind. It was the kind that had her spiraling through intrusive thoughts, that had her tossing and turning all night, so that she looked like the living dead at work the next day.

It was an energy that scared her, that made her fear she would never be able to pull herself out of any of this - That Bob's death, Will's agonizing possession, all Jonathan had shouldered through the ordeal, the emotional and physical torture El experienced, would be the things to bring her down, and keep her there.

She would write some nights when she couldn't sleep - In a diary-like prose, but they were almost letters - Explanations of her mental state, pleas to her boys to know she was sorry if anything happened to her, to know how hard she tried, but how she wished she could have given them so much more. She felt a little sorry for herself when she

wrote these things, she begged for some sense and clarity to come from it, scrawled on the lines of paper.

This can't be all I am, or all I have, this can't be my grand failure, sucked down into this darkness.

She was embarrassed re-reading her thoughts in the daylight - She threw it out, certain things would get better - Until nighttime came, and in crept the cold aching heartache, chaining her down.

The most alive she felt through the fog was when all three kids were in her home - Making a meal, doing the dishes, teaching El an array of things - Long division, Dungeons and Dragons, how to use Jon's cameras, who were The Clash.

And that was the thing - Though Joyce was certain she was depressed, though she ached and yawned, barely ate - There were still three kids in her home. El - Just like Joyce promised - was still welcome, and nothing changed in their interactions. It was reassuring, as nothing else was in these weeks.

But though there was El - There was no Hopper.

Joyce figured she scared him off, though they both knew that wasn't it - He was not scared, just respecting her need for space, and time - She all but warned him she would need time.

Hopper saw her in the midst of it during the day on New Year's Eve, when he thought he'd swing by for a coffee like was habit while both younger teens were at the Wheelers. He liked to keep busy whilst El was out of his supervision, something that would forever make him uneasy, and time with Joyce proved to be the most pleasant way to do so.

It was not the worst that Hop had seen her, considering the state she was in when Will got lost, but it was enough to show that...he had no business being impatient, he had no right to want to rush her through this trauma. It was important for him to have witnessed it, though it upset him, too. He hated seeing, and leaving, her in such distress. But he was who she needed the time from.

Joyce wouldn't quite look at him, wouldn't meet his gaze, didn't wanna share a smoke, made him a coffee whilst she took none for herself. Her face was wet with tears that didn't seem to have a beginning, or end, dark circles under her eyes made them look hollow, and she looked nearly frail.

Jim didn't...push her, didn't question her. He didn't want to embarrass her, but it was worrisome. He cut his visit short, not embracing her like he might normally, not pressing a kiss to her hair on his way out the door. He left feeling a little empty, not expecting to see her at the teen's party that night, as he sat in his truck at the end of her driveway afterward. But, it was the right thing to do, because Joyce felt relieved when he left.

Not because...not because she feared he would judge her, or wouldn't support her through it - She knew that he would, if she allowed him to. It was not because she was ashamed of her anxiety, but more that she just felt so vulnerable, so exposed, around him to begin with.

It was more than she could handle - Being such a mess in front of him, knowing how he felt - Knowing what they wanted - And she blamed herself for not being able to give it, hated herself for potentially squandering a last chance with Hopper.

Jim felt out the situation as the weeks went on. He didn't change their plans, didn't change the routine of the days El would visit, or the nights she would sleep over. He still picked Will up from the Wheelers, too, he still dropped dinner off for everyone when El would stay.

And he would ask El, ask Will...how was Joyce? He wanted to know if she was coming out of it, if him not being around was easing some of the pressure, was allowing her the space she needed.

It seemed that it was, so because of this...they progressively drifted apart in the first four months of '85. Not necessarily emotionally, because that - Shit. That was still very much a thing, but they didn't cross each other's doorsteps.

They heard each other's voices from the threshold, but the most they saw of the other was entering and exiting their vehicles - Backs of

heads, elbows around the corner. Jim knew when to do his shopping at Melvald's, because he knew her schedule. They talked on the phone at times to clarify plans their kids tried to make for them, but it was always very much in the role as parent. They weren't Joyce and Jim, they were just heads of their households discussing whatever Will and El were up to that week.

It was - Odd, it was sad, in a way, but it was also the most he could have done for her. It meant so much to her, this peculiar detachment, because she was beating her own path through the grief, and she needed that.

She needed a little independence, needed a little room to grow. Joyce had no doubt that Hopper was good for her, had no doubt that they could raise each other up through their insurmountable pain - But she also had no doubt that she needed to get through this part of it on her own. She needed to focus, she needed to navigate her emotions, not splinter herself even more by allowing Jim into her home, her heart, her life (her bed.)

She would be better for it, sooner than later, and in turn would be better for them all. She would be better for Jim when she could see the light in the day again, when she could handle more the heavy emotions that their relationship brought.

Joyce believed it was for the best, though at times she wondered if she went too far, and if he would lose interest in their whole dynamic. Jim could have his choice of women, why would he spend the winter waiting for Joyce to decide he could chastely enter her life again? Because of that worry, she stayed away a little longer than she wanted to, a little awkward and uncertain in the ups and downs, these highs and lows, the push and pull between her and Hopper.

Worried, awkward, or uncertain, though - God, it was still something, and with Jim it could be everything.

Jim strode into the station, irritated at the mud tracked through the place. It was only Monday morning, and there wouldn't be any cleaners until mid-week, at the earliest. It had been a wet spring, and a positively mucky April. His officers apparently didn't know how to -

"WIPE YOUR GOD DAMN FEET!" Jim bellowed into the main area, rolling his eyes as Callahan flinched, and Powell tipped an imaginary cap to him.

"Mornin', Chief." Said the younger officer, and Jim stopped on his way to pour a coffee. He put his hands on his hips, broad and imposing, as he tracked his eyes from Callahan's passive expression, to his mud-covered boots propped up on the desk.

"You gotta be kidding me," Hopper said, and Powell nearby shook his head, very much engrossed in his paperwork.

"I swear to Christ, Callahan." Jim thumped the officer's desk, so that he lost his place, and his feet lurched back onto the floor.

"Congratulations, you've been demoted to office cleaner today, and if,-"

"Jim," Flo came round, and interrupted his ranting, which he truthfully felt like he was just getting started on, so wound up and looking for an argument was he.

"Aw, come on, Chief, it's gonna rain today anyway,-" Callahan protested, all but whining.

"Jim,-" Flo tapped him on the shoulder, trying to pass a memo over it.

"You defying me?" Jim ignored the woman behind him, and stood taller, if possible. Not like Callahan had the brains to be intimidated by him, but it was burning off some of his irritation to wield some authority.

"Not if those were orders,-" The kid muttered, and sometimes Jim forgot how young he was, because he felt like he was dealing with fuckin' Dustin, or Harrington. Kids, all of 'em - Young, dumb, oblivious, kids.

"Hopper!" Flo was still attempting to get his attention, all three voices near shouting, and it was a bit of a scene for so early in the day.

"Consider 'em orders, then,-" Jim huffed.

"Fine,-"

"Scuse me?" Jim rounded again, and Powell was muttering something about no sense.

"JIM HOPPER!" Would this end?, Flo sighed to herself.

"Fine, Chief, sir." Callahan waved his hands about dismissively, one for theatrics, succumbing to Jim's anger.

"Flo, for the love of,-" Jim nearly knocked into the older woman as he turned to face her, directly at his shoulder.

"As charming as your particularly short fuse is today, Chief," Flo was never one to miss a beat, shoving the memo into Jim's hands with her own patience thinning. "Joyce Byers is in your office."

Ah shit. There went the wind in his sails. There was part of the reason for said short fuse, and for his positively thrumming nerves.

"Huh?"

Flo sighed again, rolled her eyes this time, and went back to her desk. The ill-tempered Chief most certainly heard her clearly, and she wasn't going to repeat herself, wasn't going to get involved in whatever vaguely depressing romance Jim and Joyce might be striking up, or snuffing out, or rekindling, or avoiding, or -

"She's been in there some time, Chief, considering you're a smidge late, so..."

"Right."

Shit.

Joyce Byers had not been in his office to wait for him since - Since that fateful day Will went missing. His heart leaped into his throat, deep-rooted concern galloping ahead of his own hang ups at seeing her again.

Hopper hadn't seen Joyce face-to-face in months. Since December. That was too long - The longest since she was back in his world (he

back in hers) - Not to see her, not to talk to her, not to hold her, or share smokes, or smile into her warm, wide, brown eyes. He had not seen her in 1985. That made him feel a bit sick - Made him feel like he'd lost out big, had fucked it all up all over again.

He kicked the little office door open (after which Callahan propped his feet back onto his desk), and strode down the hall to his office, trying not to look too eager, trying not to let her bowl him over like she did every god damn time.

There she was indeed.

10. reminds me of you

The moments that it took for Joyce to sense his presence, and meet his gaze, felt immeasurable to Hopper. It was a slow motion thing, how he stopped in the doorway, and watched her take a tremulous breath - The way the sunlight passed through the dusty office, so that her hair shone auburn beneath its warm rays, the glimpse he had of her elegant profile as she, still in that slow motion capture, turned her huge, doe eyes to look at him.

It was Hopper's turn for a tremulous breath, his lips parting with appreciation for how she glowed from her seat at his untidy desk. She floored him, much as he tried to prepare for it, and perhaps more than ever.

The warm springtime sun haloed around her, and she looked like the angel he thought her. Jim thought that there was something exceptionally radiant about her on this day. He felt a shiver across his neck.

Perhaps it was peacefulness, perhaps it was acceptance, re-emergence from mourning. Perhaps she had laid Bob, and her guilt, to rest. The calm energy filled the room, and Jim was almost overcome by it - Almost willing to be direct, to shelve his stubbornness, and make this easy. With Joyce it could be so damn easy.

But Jim's shoulders tensed as he looked at her, not quite ready for this moment - It wasn't a great day for it, his mood was sour from the start - But Joyce should have known it was a hard day, and why that was.

However, he wasn't surprised that she was being spontaneous about their reunion, that she would spring it on him, because it was too much, too uncomfortable to try to discuss it, to try to slowly ease back into their stunted dynamic.

Jim thought he had done what was right for her by staying away - and in turn, he hoped, what was right for the two of them in future - But it was not easy, loathe he was to admit. It produced a near constant twisting in his gut these long months, a state of permanent

concern from not being at her side through this hardship.

It wasn't easy to be sidled right up alongside her, to have it all out in the open, to make his apologies for withdrawing that year in the woods with El, only to have to...pull back again. It was frustrating, his own fumbling mistakes in his time with Joyce. It was his own fault, he intruded on a grieving woman, and wanted her, but it wasn't fair to either of them, and especially not to Joyce.

He knew that - He knew he had to respect what she was going through, and he did. He packed up his abstract things, and gave her time.

Though, he didn't entirely know that time meant space, too - Meant complete and utter avoidance of him, but it made him miss her real bad. He was naïve to think she could take the time she needed to grieve, and still let him into her home, still let him put his arms around her - But damn, what a letdown.

The void in his chest that had started to fill in with Joyce's presence, was emptying again in her absence. Raising El, watching her learn, and grow, it helped - It was a stopper in the leak, but he was missing Joyce. Round two of fatherhood filled a different part of the void, but it was when he thought - shit - when he thought about Joyce, that he realized...he wanted more. He wanted it all. They were on the road to some patchwork family, and he didn't want to give up on that - He wanted it back, and he wanted it all, goddammit.

Joyce was almost an exception to the black hole, because - because, shit, she had come back. What a thing - What an enormous thing that through all Jim had lost, after all whom he had hurt, he was - He was getting another go 'round with Joyce - Wasn't he? If he was, he was unworthy, but would take advantage of such a fuckin' chance.

Jim thought about her all of the time, and it was a punch to his ego - It was consuming in a way he hadn't felt in 20 fuckin' years. Not even Diane, not even the love he thought he found with her when he came back from war, had burned through him in such a way.

It was humbling.

It was a mature thing, it was something that could only be between him and Joyce - Something for which the seeds were planted in youthful romance, but it couldn't have happened, like this, until now.

Though - Shit - He wished it could have, wished in some big ways that it had always been him and Joyce (in some big ways it had been). He wouldn't change anything about his marriage to Diane, no matter how tragic was the ending - Sara - But he wished Joyce had...something better those years they were apart.

Wished that he could have given her something better.

He had a love, he had a baby girl who carried his whole heart, and Joyce had her boys. But it was in a state of chaos, of uncertainty, of all of the hard times she went through - All of the months she just tried to get by, and provide for her boys, that turned into years, and then, eventually - Here, now - Just surviving, just...getting by.

Jim feeling like he did about her, it couldn't have happened after saving Will - Sure, there was enough groundwork laid then for him to start falling, to respect her in a way that he respected few - But it was Joyce, determined, fierce, tenacious Joyce, saving him in those tunnels that really blew his world apart, opened his eyes real, real wide.

Shit, unfinished business with Joyce really did a number on him, and he wanted more of it. The pain of it was exquisite, as it was only she for whom he yearned in such a way.

He was selfish, obtuse, almost careless in these realizations. Who did he think he was? So much for not wanting to be an opportunist from Bob's death. But he didn't give a shit, sometimes, he just knew what it felt like, and it felt like the right place to be.

It felt like one last chance.

Jim tried not to get too bitter about it, about the lost time (more lost time) - Tried not to let it bother him when she wouldn't take his calls, or passed messages through their kids. He fast learned how to play along, what were the new rules of their dynamic.

It still irked him, but that spoke more of his own bull-headed impatience than anything Joyce was doing - She wasn't doing anything but taking the time she needed, and it wasn't her fault that he was submerged in her, and couldn't get it together.

That he had baggage, that his paranoia about curses and black holes really reared its head when he felt like he was losing something good...that was on him. It wasn't her cross to bear, it was his to battle with, as she battled her aching guilt.

They both had something to do in the meantime, Jim pathetically reasoned.

He worried that if they never were in the same orbit again that...that he would fail with El. He didn't realize how much he missed a partner in parenthood that year alone with El, until Joyce found out, and suddenly - Suddenly it all made a little more sense. He could do this, sure, but he could do it well with Joyce.

And the kid was another story altogether. El was so taken with Joyce that she didn't really...pick up on anything between Jim and Joyce at first. El wanted Joyce's time and attention, wanted her motherly guidance, and if Jim wasn't always there taking up Joyce's time that was fine by her. But, when things got awkward, when they didn't talk about the other anymore, when Joyce didn't invite him in for coffee, and Jim didn't ask - El, and all of the kids, got suspicious.

It was over their heads, both parents assumed, but the longer on it went, the more curious, and questioning, were they all (Jonathan the least, because he really, really didn't want to get involved in his Mom's love life, though even he admitted she wasn't her old self.)

Both adults were a little more tense some days, and as outwardly loving as Joyce was to the kids, they could sense she was in a darkness through the winter. El didn't really...blame Jim, didn't take the situation with Joyce out on him, but would sometimes get frustrated.

El would try to understand what had changed - It wasn't a big deal at first, but once she had soaked up so much of Joyce's attention, and affection, that she really knew her, too...she knew Joyce was sad. She

knew that when Hopper was there, Joyce wasn't as sad. El would come home and excitedly talk about the day, but then quietly talk about Joyce, and just somewhat plead of Jim to help make Joyce feel better, which gutted him.

Because, even when Bob was alive, Jim felt that he...had a part of Joyce that no one else had, a segment from which Bob was kept, that Lonnie certainly never saw, and Jim felt a smug affirmation about this. He felt it was perhaps part of her truest self - He knew her first, before fucking Lonnie, he had known her best all of those years ago, and she knew him.

It could flatten him if he thought about it too long, could steal his breath a little embarrassingly. She knew all of his secrets and torments, knew how to hurt him, but knew how to heal, too - He had that bit of her, and she had that of him, and it was...poignant. If he was a more sentimental man (which, Jesus, all of these women who have been in and out of his life were turning him into one), he could cry about it.

All of this seemed to hit Jim in that one, long, slow moment in which he saw her before she saw him. Everything sped up when their eyes met, deep honeyed brown catching his, and froze him on the spot.

"Hey, Hop." Joyce said so warmly, smile so beatific, that he felt his pulse leap in his throat, felt a jolt in his gut, to his groin.

But Hell if Jim wasn't stubborn. Did she need to know how she affected him so? Maybe. He'd let her in, but he was a little too proud just then.

He only missed a beat before he continued into his office, giving her a wide berth in case she tried to touch him (or he couldn't resist touching her). He sniffed, sighing as he collapsed into the stiff chair, taking his time getting situated.

He steepled his hands on the desk, rolled his neck to ease a crick in it (too many nights falling asleep face down on the old chesterfield at the cabin), before he flicked his eyes to Joyce's face, impassively.

Jim kept his face blank, his eyebrows raised a bit, expectantly, waiting - Not giving anything, not speaking first.

Joyce bit her bottom lip, features pinching with uncertainty at his lack of greeting. The easy happiness she radiated was sucked out of the room, and she looked ill at ease now. It was sudden, like the sun went behind a cloud.

Jim's mouth set in a terse line, and he was made of the kind of stuff that meant he could ignore Joyce's vulnerability if he really wanted to - Really wanted to take his mood out on her, really wanted to blame her for how the black hole loomed over him those months without her.

But, Fuck. It was Joyce. He didn't wanna bring her down. His affection for her overpowered his hard-headed nature.

"Hey, Joycie." Hopper said quickly at her recoil, sorry to see her frown when she had smiled so big, and he felt relieved at the save. Her smile spread again through the teeth still biting her lip, and it was so winsome that Jim thought he might burst.

You're weak, he thought, but he didn't even mind.

"Mad at me?" She winced at her own question, eyes softening apologetically. She wanted to get it out of the way, he knew, and he appreciated the effort.

She watched him as he shrugged.

"Nah, I mean," Jim shifted, rubbing the back of his neck, the skin beneath his collar burning under her scrutiny.

"Nah." He said again inelegantly, for there was so much he could say, but he felt like he had to play it safe. He was a fool for her, but if she was here to push him off some more - Well, whatever she needed, but he didn't think he could bear showing his hand any more than he already had.

"Wanna be?" Joyce needled, really wanting to know how he felt - She didn't want him to pretend for her sake, didn't want this to be a stumbling block to their moving forward.

"No. I don't want to be." Jim grumbled, dropping her gaze, shuffling some papers, grabbing a pen.

"So, you are,"

"What?"

"Mad at me."

"I'm - I just," Jim felt like she was roping him into something he had absolutely no intention of discussing - He was letting it go, he was ready to move on as soon as her smile fell, and his heart thumped.

"Hop."

"Joyce. Shit - I'm not mad - It's been - I didn't know time meant space at first, but I figured it out, yknow? And it's been a little...maddening working through it - Feels like we're sharing custody of a kid that ain't even ours. But I'm not mad...at you."

"She's yours, though," Joyce said quietly, breezing by the rest of his statement for now. There was a point to make about El.

"Yeah. Yeah, I mean - She is." He flashed his hands to the side, open-palmed, as if to say, 'you're point?'

"She was mine too, Hop, the second she walked back through my door that night." Joyce blinked long lashes as she met his eyes across the desk. That was a big thing to share, she thought. The eye contact was brief, but in his she saw flash something dear, and wholesome.

"Of course," Jim breathed, with an unblinking nod, impressed with her conviction, moved by her dedication to his adopted kid. "Yeah, of course she was."

"You know I mean it?" Joyce asked, earnest, genuine, placing her hand on his desk, and slowly trailing her fingertips toward the middle.

"Yeah." Jim laid his own hand on the desk, their fingers barely meeting before withdrawing - Hers to her lap, his to the armrests. He gripped them tightly as he watched her fidget. He thought that she

had a smudge of brown makeup right against her lash line, for her eyes were all the more arresting on this day, on this dazzling spring morning.

He had never forgotten how beautiful she was. She was his favourite brunette, she was a touchstone in his life, and she was still goddamn beautiful. And she was here, warm and alive - Haunted by many things, of this dimension and others, of past and present, but she herself was blessedly untouched by his personal black hole. It was - heartening, encouraging - everything.

The office grew quiet, and the sounds from the street filtered through his window - People about their Monday, normal routine taking place feet away, as they were here putting something back together.

"How'd'ya get here?" Jim's chair scraped noisily across the floor as he tried to adjust himself to a less combative position, and he frowned at the potential for awkwardness. That is what he didn't want. "Didn't see your car when I came in."

"Walked over from the store. I was just covering for a couple of hours this morning."

"Right." Jim nodded, drumming his hands against the edge of the desk, wishing he'd poured that coffee before he embarked on this. It was heavy for a Monday morning.

Joyce chewed her thumbnail, and seemed to space out for a moment, her eyes unfocused. She looked so far away from him on the other side of his desk.

It was funny, he thought, considering how terribly small this room had been that morning she turned up to report Will missing. How Jim would have given anything for her to leave, for Will to turn up with no further interaction with his frazzled Mother. Her cigarette smoke had filtered through the office that November morning, so it felt like she was right against him, permeating his space, even as she shouted at him about his lateness.

Shit. Not even two years ago, and now, now -

"I didn't know I'd need space, either, Hop," Joyce tiptoed back into the waters. "Not until we were in the middle of it. I knew you understood, but when you were around I wanted to snap out of it. I couldn't, and it made me hate myself that I couldn't."

"I know, Joyce - Really." Jim nodded as she spoke, truly understanding - Of course he did, just like did she - Though, just because they understood each other didn't mean they were often on the same page.

"The intensity...it butted heads with my grief and guilt. I'm constantly worried about the kids, but feel like I have to watch Will and El without them really noticing. I couldn't...just couldn't figure you and me out at the same time, even though I worried about you, too." She looked pained as she spoke, and he figured that she was - It had been a long, dark winter, the kind that is hard to get through under the best of circumstances.

It was the kind of winter by which Jim had been pulled down before, too. Jim knew how winter settled the grief into ones bones, and hated to think Joyce felt that - That she was cold and aching and alone, but put it upon herself to worry about him, and his kid, too.

But he was glad she was coming out the other side of it. She was strong in general, but also strong in ways that only a Mother can be (this he had experience with, this he remembered in Diane's strength during, and after, Sara), and he could only deeply respect what he couldn't understand.

"Hey - Shit - It's alright - Worried about me? - You - Jesus, it was just hard to know you were going through that, and I couldn't be there. I felt useless, and shitty sending El there as if everything was okay," Really, he just wanted to lay it to rest, he just wanted to find their rhythm again, but Joyce had come here with a mission to communicate, and God help him if he thought he was going to get out of it.

"But that's part of what helped. And it means the world that you gave me what I needed - Even though some days all I wanted was you there beside me." Her cheeks were ever so slightly pink as she said this, and her face crinkled at her own soppiness.

Jim didn't mind, he lapped it up.

"Yeah?" He asked, enough of his ego unbruised to perk up at this, the corners of his eyes crinkling warmly as he smiled, softening him in a way that made Joyce's breath hitch.

"Yeah." Joyce murmured, and there it was again - That quality, that glow, that confidence he knew from her decades ago, blooming delicately out of her today, sitting in his office.

Jim inhaled deeply, his chest puffing out as he took her in. It was all coming back easy now; gentle, like a warm tide, like a slow sip of dark liquor, like twilight in June, like a Sinatra record in the evening - This might do just fine.

He watched her until his eyes stung, then he cleared his throat. He swiped a big hand across his face, tugging at his newly shorn mustache. Joyce wrinkled her nose with a smile, as if she were suppressing a comment on his facial hair. He was sure he would hear it later, and he longed to.

There was the quiet again, but it was nice, and comfortable, this time. Joyce lit a cigarette, but Jim just kept watching her. He wanted to reach across the desk to touch her again, but she sat back in the chair a little more comfortably, and there was no subtle way to do so.

Her hair was longer, he noticed, her waves a little more tamed than normal, but still had that wild quality to it. She wore a white shirt, and faded black jeans, but they fit her better than her usual stuff - She was in her same old leather jacket, but it went well with her look. Her lips were pink and plump as they pursed around her cigarette, and Jim watched her tongue dart out to wet them once she finished the smoke.

"You know who I was thinking about today?" Joyce's voice was small, serious - Nervous, almost. Jim sat at the edge of his seat, putting most of his weight onto the desk, leaning closer to better see and hear her.

"Who?" Jim asked, brow heavy, voice deep, attention entirely on her.

"Benny." Joyce admitted, and her mouth sloped sadly on the word.

Jim's breath whooshed out of him unevenly at his dead friend's name. His hands clenched tightly against the wood. Yeah. Shit.

So, Joyce was in tune with that. She hadn't forgotten, and she knew how tender Jim was feeling about it. Said reason for his sour mood, for not wanting to get into anything with her today, for wanting to brood, and glare, and be alone - Though none of that was really playing out so far.

"His birthday." Jim said with a nod, acknowledging that he was thinking about Benny, too. The emotion was impossible to keep off of his face, so he lit a smoke this time.

He felt a little agitated, suddenly, at himself more than anything, and ridiculously at the fact they weren't smoking at the same time. He felt out of sync with her when they weren't smoking together. He had felt out of sync with her these long months, and he was tired of it.

"It still doesn't feel real, Hop. Nothing that happened that year does, but especially losing Benny." They had never really talked about that profound loss, and it rushed out of Joyce in a way that indicated she wanted to now.

"I know. I'm," Jim cleared his throat, as he felt it tighten with emotion. He drew from the cigarette until his lungs burned. "I'm a bit of a fuckin' wreck today, Joyce."

"I wondered if you were okay," She shifted like she might get up, but thought better of it.

"I was thinking about Benny, and I was remembering all of these..." Joyce trailed off with a heavy sigh, and her eyes shone like Jim figured his were shining. "Do you know that he let us stay with him, when Will was newborn?"

"Wha'?" Jim did not, and his voice was thick with the plume of smoke that he exhaled at the same time he spoke.

"Yeah - Maybe a week. Lonnie showed up with some scumbags, but they weren't his usual crowd. His regular buddies annoyed me, but

this crew scared me. Didn't feel safe. I went to the diner after a couple of nights, didn't want to be home. It was way after closing when Ben finally tried to...gently throw us out," Joyce smiled, remembering the gruff but gentle giant as he checked the clock, watched Jonathan run around his place of business, listened to her newborn wail.

"I just - I broke down, I guess, and next thing I know he's offering me his guest room. It was - Jesus. It was the most support I'd had for years. We felt safe - Hop, Will was less than a month old, I think, this little baby, and I had...I had no one...He did us a real favour that time." Joyce recalled the details so easily, as if it was something she held closely all these years. She was sharing for his sake, but it didn't diminish the fact it had truly meant the world to her - Then, and now.

"I didn't know," Jim said, shaking his head a little at the darker details of the story, but couldn't help but feel so grateful for his old friend, too - Moved by his actions, glad he was there for Joyce when Jim himself was not. Glad she was safe, even for a moment. "But I'm not surprised he did that."

"Yeah, and um - On Thanksgiving one year, Lonnie skipped town for a couple of weeks - Stole my pay cheque, I couldn't cook a meal - Had nothing. Benny found out, and had a bunch of us out to the diner, and cooked up a big feast instead. Kids didn't even care we weren't having a family meal, because Thanksgiving at Benny's, I mean, that was cool to them then, you know? Saved my ass again." Joyce tapped her fingers against the desk to make a point, to really emphasize it - These weren't small things in her life, though they were quite simple for Benny to offer, and do, they had altered Joyce's world enough to get her through a little while longer.

"Goddamn. God love him." Jim murmured, stubbing out the smoke, clenching his jaw, trying to think about the good times with Benny, trying not to remember finding him that day - Murdered, Jim was certain.

It helped, he thought, to hear these reassuring stories about him - That Benny was exactly who Jim knew he was since they were kids, that he was there to help Joyce when there was no one else around.

Jim figured Joyce knew it would help to hear these things, that maybe she even chose today as their reunion, not for her sake, but his. Maybe she was doing fine without him all along, and she knew that Jim could use a little company - He didn't care, he wasn't often the needy one, but he would be just that if Joyce said so.

"I know, huh? You don't - I wonder if he knew how much it meant to me." Joyce asked, almost as if to ponder if Benny had ever mentioned it to Jim.

He hadn't, because Benny was a respectful, loyal man - Jim didn't need to hear about Joyce's struggles from anyone but Joyce if she so chose, and that made Benny's acts of kindness all the more genuine. There was no motive, no whispering about her behind closed doors, no filling Jim in to give him satisfaction of knowing that Lonnie was a piece of shit (though Jim never had a doubt.) Benny just helped her, and cared about her, and he was a better man than Lonnie, or himself, for it, Jim thought.

"I bet he knew, Joyce," Jim offered. "You were old friends, too. And, that was him, wasn't it? Fucking selfless."

"I miss him - I hadn't really took time to miss him until now." Joyce sounded guilty, but their eyes met and there was a silent pass given - She had a fuck of a lot to worry about in the time during, and since, Benny's death.

"Me, too. I think he was my only friend left in the world. He pulled me up by the bootstraps more than once when I came back to town," This Joyce knew, of course, for one of the times she specifically sent Benny to do the job. "He was a goddamn good friend, and a good man. Shit. He didn't deserve what he got."

"No," Joyce breathed, and through all that they had been through that week they searched for Will, the details of Benny's death were not discussed, not really.

"I know Benny didn't kill himself," Jim said, reading her expression. "I know those baddies from the Lab, the first time around, had something to do with it. And I'd, uh, return the favour, if I had the chance - For El, and Ben."

"I'd be right there with you." Joyce said eagerly, nodding, her bangs covering her eyes as she frowned deeply.

"I don't doubt it one bit." Jim said, trying to lighten the mood, but maybe instead it just made them both think that, well, whose to say there wouldn't be a chance?

Who was to say those bastards weren't hiding, that Brenner wasn't alive and plotting, that evil won't resurface in due time? The comments felt a little too real, too much like an actual possible plan that they might have to follow through on. Jim swallowed, and Joyce remained serious, sad, across from him.

"Remember - heh - D'you remember Benny's 40th birthday?" Jim asked, truly smiling this time, as the memory was a happy one in their recent past. "That is the one and only social event we have both attended since I came back to town. D'you remember?"

"It's blurry, but how could I forget? The only party I've been to in years." Joyce smiled bashfully, remembering the bottle of wine and amaretto she had indulged in that night.

She managed to find a sitter, and Lonnie was nowhere to be found (this was preferable). Benny shut the diner down early, and decked it out - An open bar, disco ball, just a true blow out bash.

Joyce remembered dancing with Benny, remembered warbling Sonny & Cher, and how it felt a bit like a high school reunion - Benny was pals with most of the town, and that included his old high school chums; Jim, and Karen, among them.

"I tried to take you home that night." Jim told her - bold, reckless, admission spilling forth - and he watched a splotchy pink flush grow across her neck, watched her eyes widen behind the fringe of auburn.

"You did not! I was still married,-" Her protest was weak, as she thought back to that night.

They had danced, too, danced like they did in high school, danced fast and fun, improvising moves, Jim twirling her round, and round.

This was some months before their argument in the bar parking lot,

when she wasn't quite so disillusioned by all that Jim Hopper had become.

Joyce didn't remember how she ended up dancing with Jim at Benny's birthday, didn't remember him saying a word as he seemed to emerge from a shadowy corner, tall and imposing. He was drunk enough that he was smiling for once, but not so drunk that he was mean, or sloppy. She remembered his eyes narrowed warmly, remembered the crooked smile on his lips.

Maybe he had tried to take her home, she thought, though more subtly than the others he took home in those years. They spilled out the back door, laughing into the cool night, sweaty, breathless, and flushed. The sweat evaporated from their exposed flesh as swirling vapour into the air, and Jim dug smokes out of his pocket. Joyce spread her arms wide, stretching her neck out, the cool air a relief on her hot skin. Her shoulders and legs were bare, and goose-flesh rose as her heart rate slowed.

Jim watched her offer herself to the night air. He placed the cigarette between her lips, and she blinked up at him through lidded eyes as he lit it.

She couldn't remember what was said, didn't remember him propositioning her as such, but maybe - Yeah, maybe he had commented on her legs, or slipped the material of the dress between his fingers, draped an arm across her naked shoulders when she was sufficiently cooled down and was shivering instead. Shit, they'd really been waist-deep in this for years now, hadn't they...

"As if fuckin' Lonnie Byers was going to stop me,-"

"I get that, Hop - I just don't think you tried to take me home. If so, it wasn't much of an attempt,-" Joyce was a little surprised they were going headlong back into this, but it was exhilarating, too - To be open and honest together, to not have to build back up to what had been clear back in December.

"No, probably wasn't. You were - It wasn't as effortless with you as it would have been with someone else. I do remember that I didn't take anyone home that night, because I wished it was you,-"

"Jesus, Hopper,-"

"That goddamn black dress." He grinned, sprawling back in his chair, legs wide, posture relaxed.

He remembered her pale, smooth skin, and the sweat that shone on her forehead, her clavicles, and between her breasts. It was the first time they had fun together again since way back - Fun like that, at least, fun that didn't involve board games with their kids, or a quiet smoke on her porch (because, yeah, maybe Jim was a boring old man now, because those things were fun to him now, too.)

"Hop!" Joyce felt mortified, but her cheeks also hurt from smiling, and it was nice to see - It was nice to feel.

She remembered that she kissed Hop's cheek leaving Benny's party, and burned from head to toe thinking about him afterward. Her legs hurt from dancing that night, and, if she squinted, some of their dance moves could have been born in the bedroom.

Joyce remembered giggling with Karen later, both of them drunk, as Karen asked Joyce every dirty question she could about her past with Jim. He was a mess, but the Chief could still look good when he wanted to, and both women knew it that night.

"Shit, Joyce - I'm glad he was there for you. I wish I could've been." Jim pulled her back to the present, and - He meant it, though it was so much more complicated than that. He couldn't have just...been there. There was so much hurt, so much time, so much resentment, so much war, so much abuse, it - He couldn't have been there for her in any sort of casual way.

"I think we were gonna burn out no matter what back then," Joyce reasoned, and they both knew it as an easy fact at this point. Whether Vietnam had happened, or not, whether Lonnie had forced himself back into the picture, or not - Chances are they wouldn't have made it as the complete kids they were then. But, now -

"You were restless, you couldn't - You wouldn't have been happy sticking around for me. But I'm glad Benny was around. And I'm glad you had your baby girl."

"Me, too. I wish you could have been happy, too." Jim thought it was a presumptuous thing for him to say, a little callous - Maybe she had been happy, maybe moments pieced together added up to a certain level of happiness for her.

Maybe Jim wouldn't have made her any happier than Lonnie did, though his ego would never say that aloud, and he certainly wouldn't have laid his hands on her, and he would have raised their kids whether they stayed together or not, but this wasn't about the ways in which Jim was better than Lonnie, but the ways in which he was the same -

"I have my boys, Jim, and it was all worth it for that." Of course it was, and he nodded fiercely in response - Her boys were her pride and joy, and as they fucking should.

"Good. Yeah." Jim tossed a hand through his hair, feeling wore out from the marathon that was their conversation. He forgot how damn tiring it was to care so fuckin' fiercely - No wonder Joyce was always thrumming with anxiety, no wonder she was always so sure, so devoted to her boys (and their girl.)

It was tiring, but, shit, it felt like a purpose again, to Jim.

"Guess I should head out." Joyce said, and she played with the buttons on her jacket.

"Off the rest of the day, yeah?" Jim straightened up, preparing to say their goodbyes.

"Yeah." Joyce smiled, and she really did look good - Pale, maybe a little more thin than when he left her, but not frail - She looked good, healthy. She had seen herself through it, had flexed her independent muscle once again, and Jim was as proud of her as he was desperately wanting to be her partner in it all.

"You don't have to go," He found himself saying, and he was the kind of man he would have laughed at in his twenties (a feeling one.)

"Well, I can't really sit here and watch you work," Joyce said, wrinkling her nose with amusement, and Jim's brow crumpled

pathetically with pure, pulsing fondness.

"I wouldn't mind." Jim said emphatically, and Joyce could only smile more.

"I'll see you again, you know - You don't gotta keep me here. I'll be back." She joked, holding her hands up as if to surrender.

"Can I come to you, can we,-" Jim tried to keep his voice low, because he thought it might crack with all he was thinking and feeling in the moment.

"Yeah, let's slip back into things, what say you?" Joyce bit her lip again, and Jim knew it was unintentional, but goddammit it was like an electrical jolt to his self.

"Aye." He assented with a nod.

"Good. I'm sorry I disappeared," She said, in the way adults wrap conversations up with a flurry of motion - putting her smokes in her bag, pocketing her lighter, not really meeting his eyes.

"It was your turn, and you still fed our kid, and chauffeured her to that damn Wheeler kids basement, so,"

"Can't tell if you're grateful, or resentful," Joyce winked, and Jim grinned, and it was stupid how natural it was - It was pure, simple, stupidity that he had ever been anywhere but here.

"Bit of both." He could have spent the entire day doing this with her, this banter, this rapport - It was playful, it was comfortable.

"All right. Get to it." Joyce finally stood, smiling, and brushed her hands against her thighs.

Jim felt his face fall. He really, really didn't want her to leave. It was teenaged, but he couldn't help it. His devotion to her and her well-being was an entity within him.

"Hey," Jim's voice drew her back in as she was one step toward the door. "C'mere." He didn't know why, he couldn't explain it, but he'd been so far away from her for the longest wintry months, and he

wanted to see her in this springtime glory.

Joyce frowned, but not unkindly. She took a few steps in his direction, standing just ahead of the chair she had vacated.

"No, I mean, c'mere." Jim gestured to his right, turning in his chair - He wanted to stand up, but also wanted to take her in from this vantage point.

Joyce scoffed a laugh, but approached him, and stood behind the desk beside him. He thought he saw a tremble in her hands as she clasped them against her middle. He didn't have a plan, but he pressed his lips together with a noisy inhale, and blinked up at her slowly. She was awash in the sunshine, the blinds making little shadows across her delicate features, highlighting her sharp cheekbones even more so.

He made no movements, no attempts, and he wasn't so much chickening out as he was for all the world taken by her.

Joyce moved first, sensing his hesitation, the extent to which he was overcome - The intensity in his gaze, the sadness between his brow. He was missing Benny, he had missed her, but she was here, and they were going to get this right.

She grasped his big face in her petite hands like she did when they rescued him. She tilted his head back, so he was gazing straight up at her, and neither of them were smiling as she ran her fingertips along his bristly cheeks, then down his jaw.

"Where ya been, Joycie," Jim murmured as if they had not just spent half an hour together, as if this was the chance to be completely honest. He made no apologies for how he looked at her lips for a long minute.

"Just across town, Jim." Joyce whispered it, and the playfulness morphed into something much deeper between them, much more intense, but no less satisfying.

Jim had to swallow down the rush of want he felt at the sound of her throaty whisper.

"You been okay?"

"All things considered."

"You would have called if it was real bad?"

"I would have called, Hop."

His eyelids fluttered as she stroked her fingers through his hair, lightening in the warmer weather, and then around the shell of his ear. She tilted her head, and she looked so utterly at ease that Jim felt a thick calm blanket him.

It was funny, how malleable they were around each other - They could excite, and ignite each other, but they could calm, too, with not much more than physical closeness. They were both thinking of how goddamn important was that.

Jim closed his eyes.

"Had to learn that just because I'm sad about what happened to Bob, I'm still glad that it wasn't you, and that we saved you."

Jim looped his arms around her waist without opening his eyes, and his mouth parted embarrassingly as she speared both of her hand through his hair over and over, very nearly putting him to sleep at his desk.

"Makes me happier than I should admit to hear that." He grumbled, dragging his hands down to go under her coat, and then back up to spread his fingers wide against her back, only her t-shirt separating them now. He wanted to claim as much surface area of her that he could, and he could feel the warmth of her skin through her shirt, that he couldn't through her coat - He could feel the notches of her spine, and the clasp of her bra.

"It's okay to admit it, Hop." Joyce was still whispering, and he couldn't remember feeling so calm in all his years back in Hawkins. He was sure he had - Was sure he had medicated himself to a drooling lump before, but not like this - Nothing was like this. It made him shake to think he could feel like this all of the time - That they could give this to each other.

If she kept touching him like that he would be admitting more than Joyce may like to hear, for he was certain, now, that he loved her, that he was in love with her. The time apart did nothing to quell that inside of him, and it seared through him, scorching his edges as he tried to keep it to himself.

Joyce took the time to look at him closely - To look at him in ways that she had not been able to in years, not when he watched her back with a better poker face than her own. He looked younger with his eyes closed, without anything pulling at the sides, or heaving his forehead down, his heavy brow relaxed as she hypnotically twirled his hair. It was something her boys loved, of course, something she herself loved when she was a little girl, but it was something that Jim Hopper had so especially loved, that Joyce found herself mourning all the years she had missed doing this.

She remembered him falling asleep in her lap like this after football practice, remembered how he nuzzled his head against her breasts after their first time together, and she twined and twirled his hair just like this. She felt warm, pulsing butterflies tumble at her centre as she thought about that, as she took him in.

It had been not been easy to be away from him, but it was worth it - It was worth the restraint, worth the time to patch over some of her more festering wounds, and develop some ways to cope so that she wasn't entirely reliant on him. It was worth it to be here now, to watch his penetrating blue eyes open and absolutely steal her breath like they did when she was eighteen, and -

"Brought you that coffee, Chief, you never came back for it." Flo strolled into Hopper's office, to which the door was of course open, and Joyce jumped back from the solid man beneath her fingertips, both of her hands flying to her burning cheeks as Flo approached the desk - Never pausing for a moment.

She was of an age where nothing surprised her, and all this beating around the bush fatigued her. Good, they were finally getting this out of the way, so maybe Jim would stop terrorizing his staff sixty percent of the time - A win for Flo, whatever the circumstance.

"Would you like one, dear?" She asked Joyce, setting the coffee mug

down, and Jim groaned loudly, feeling much like being caught by a school marm who was then dragging the awkwardness out.

"Fl-o." Jim's hands were both still very much up Joyce's coat, rubbing his fingers against her tense back.

"For the love of God, Chief," She sighed dismissively, then raised her eyebrows to Joyce, who shook her head, still holding onto her cheeks.

"No - No, thanks, Flo, thank you."

"Y'don't have to thank her twice," Jim murmured, rolling his eyes.

"She has manners, Chief! Isn't that wonderful - Gosh I wonder how much it would hurt for any of that to rub off on,-"

"Oh my GOD, Flo." And Jim sounded so much like his adopted daughter in that moment that Joyce laughed out loud, and it was a nice April morning, indeed.

i put joyce and jim alone together in another room for an extended period of time with heavy reflection - weird, right? lol. it's indulgent, but it's Jopper. i 3 them, and miss them.

thank you thank you thank you as always for the comments and conversation and wonderful content from this fandom. i'm a fangirl for this fandom.

11. where we started

Normally, perhaps, Joyce would have been quick to flee the scene after Flo's interruption caught them in a compromising position. Her face was burning as it was, but she didn't hurry to grab her bag, or beeline for the door before the moment dragged on any longer. She stood steady beside Jim's desk, though avoided eye contact with the older woman.

She didn't want to leave Hopper before a proper goodbye. Joyce's lightness around him was more important than her embarrassment of being found by Flo with Jim's hands up her coat. Joyce chewed her thumbnail, whilst Hopper and Flo had a brief back and forth, and soon Flo left the office (the door still open, mind you, this wasn't a motel.)

Joyce exhaled shakily, chuckling a bit as Jim stood up, his hands sliding down her back as he did.

"Sorry 'bout that." He murmured, and Jim at his full height did nothing to soothe the heat in Joyce's cheeks.

"Nothing to apologize for. I should really get going, though." Impossibly, somehow, she found herself closer to him than before.

Joyce gazed up at him, her breasts brushing against his middle as he put his arms around her, resting them at the small of her back. Oh. There was no slow and steady easing into this, and she didn't care when it felt like this.

"Yeah, before Callahan wanders in next." He smiled, teeth visible briefly, as he settled himself around her. Joyce slid her hands up his solid chest, landing on his shoulders. It felt surprisingly second nature, even after all the years, to come together like this.

Hop's eyes slanted sleepily, aftershocks of Joyce playing with his hair, and she felt her pulse thrum as she recalled exactly when and where she had seen that look from him before. It was deliciously post-coital in nature, and it did nothing to spur her to the door. Joyce just completely enjoyed this Hopper - Warm, laid-back, teasing Jim,

following her lead as she sat in his office this morning, trying to smooth the edges of their relationship.

He was so responsive to her own calm demeanor, and it made her feel confident, made her certain of her choices. Joyce worried that he would be ready for a fight when he saw her again after the winter apart - She would have deserved it a little, maybe, and she knew Hop was swallowing his pride tremendously to just - Smile back at her, and let her back in real easy. It flowed through her, that fact - That fact that he seemed to care about her more than his pride.

It was important. That whole course correcting he had done was still in action, still evident in front of her, and she could see, and adored, that he was trying so hard.

The winter had been - bleak. She didn't want to think about it, didn't want to think about how heavy she felt, how every day was an effort, every movement excruciating in the way it sucked the energy from her very bones. Just sitting could push her to tears, so overwhelmed, so drained was she.

She couldn't make her brain cooperate on the simplest tasks. Cooking seemed impossible, doing more than one errand was exhausting. She had to live her days in the most basic of terms - Wake up. Eat. Kids to school. Drive. Work.

Many days, through January and into February, she came home and went to bed soon after - No matter the time of day. Or, she'd curl up on the couch with all three kids there, giving the illusion she was participating, but she could have been in bed, as she was withdrawn and listless no matter which room she was in, or on which surface she lay.

Joyce let the guilt, and grief, swallow her for some long weeks. She let it consume her, let it berate her, let it remind her that Bob was gone because you had to save Jim. Bob was gone because of your actions, because of your indecisiveness. You were never going to move with him to Maine. Why did you drag it out, why did you lead him on, and let him die? It's your fault he's dead. The man is dead and you didn't even love him. Bob was so good, so whole, and wanted the best for your family, but you couldn't ever want anything

good, could you?

It was a spiral, a battle, a dark inner monologue, and through it Joyce was not sure she would get. She had gotten through a lot, more than most, she believed - But it was among the lowest she had ever felt. It was hard to do it alone, hard to do it with another kid to love, and care for - But she wouldn't have done it any other way.

She had strength, if nothing else, and she overcame it, as Hopper knew she would.

Strength - It's why she was back here with him this April morning, why she accepted Bob's death, why she found herself reborn in the spring.

Hopper was foremost.

Joyce had let the dark, swirling, negative cloud consume her, let it control, and run her, but, eventually, of it she grew tired. She still deserved to live, the longer days, and sunshine, reminded her. She never would have willingly, nor gladly, hurt Bob - She never wanted for anything bad to happen to him, never wanted him to get too involved in that confusing part of their lives. The pain of losing him was foul, and aching - Crawled under her skin all hours of the day and night - But she knew it was bigger than her, bigger than any of their control.

She had cared for him, deeply, had felt peace in his presence, healed in his kindness - She never spent the days actively thinking of Jim, never intentionally sought him out over Bob - But even Joyce could not deny that, as guilty as it made her feel, the pull of Joyce and to Jim, and Jim to Joyce, was magnetic.

Jim sat on Will's bed in her freezing home looking at his drawings, Jim came to the appointments, Jim put an arm around her when Doc Owens described what they believed was wrong with Will, because Jim was natural - He was naturally understanding, he listened, and knew the whole story.

He had his own whole story, and now Joyce had hers - It was so easy to call Hop, to not have to start at the beginning, and for him to try

to help her make sense of the fragments they were working with. Jim had no room for doubt anymore, Jim never made her feel less, or wrong - He made her feel seen, and heard, and she always breathed a little bit easier when he was in the vicinity.

They were a team, a partnership, and Bob coming along, Jim disappearing to raise El, did not change that when the goings really got tough. Joyce respected his job, his schedule, even without knowing about El - But goddamn if he wasn't the first person she called, goddamn if he didn't tell her to make him the first person she called.

Bob was - Nice. Bob was sweet, but Bob only saw the glossy outside of what Joyce tried to show as her life - Bob worshiped her a little bit, and she didn't feel like she had room to shatter if so be the need. Hop, Hop...

They had shattered each other years ago, had been shattered by grief and loss since, and the further into the winter she went, the more she knew that she could not deny it for much longer - Could not let the depression overtake what could be a very big second chance at that kind of support.

This thought became stronger than the grief, the guilt, the fumbling through, until, finally, she woke in the morning without that heaviness, without that bone-aching grief, and she started to put herself back together again, just a little bit at a time. She opened the windows one day, and the sun had strength, the breeze a sweetness, and Joyce finally felt like she had re-emerged.

Now she was back here with him, and her fingertips were a little shaky, but she felt like it was the right place to be. She might cry about it when she was back in her car - Because she never thought, never dreamed, never dared think of Jim like this, in all their years apart...

And despite all those years apart, Joyce very much knew that look in his eyes, she recognized the way her cheeks heated under it just like they did at seventeen (and eighteen, nineteen, twenty...when did he leave, why had they not always been together?) - The wanting you...

"Right...wouldn't want that..." Joyce's lips barely moved, murmuring, as she felt herself drawn in, felt a pull that was irresistible and dangerous. She was craning up, up onto her tiptoes, and she felt the entirety of him rumble as he inhaled deep, his chest expanding, and shoulders rising with the movement.

"No, only one thing I want right now." Jim said, and it could have been jokingly, could have been light and harmless had his tone not been so low, had his gaze not been so intense. He bent down just a bit, and Joyce felt the words spark at her core, a jolt of excitement at her centre, and goddamn - Goddamn.

"You can have it..." She breathed, and saw his reaction only in the way the muscle at his temple jumped.

They were being playful, flirty, but there was a dark edge to it - A quality earned from denying themselves this for so long, from being on the edge, so keyed-up for each other for a lifetime, and it had the potential to be absolutely explosive.

It was not the time, nor the place for it, Joyce thought, but she wasn't about to tell him that, wasn't about to stop him when he had that look in his eye. They were the stormiest blue at the best of times, and seemed darker with what she perceived as barely suppressed desire.

Jim, as if she were weightless, lifted her with one arm wrapped around her back, in a gentle motion, and sat her on the edge of his desk, lending her a little height in the endeavour. His fingers splayed across her back with one hand, and the other smoothed her hair out of her eyes. He moved a strand that stuck to her mouth, and his thumb gently plucked her bottom lip as he did so, and Joyce may have moaned aloud at that alone.

It was all very innocent considering, and she appreciated how effortless it was - Appreciated that he knew she would have to strain so far, and he would have to crouch so low, and her on the desk gave them the belief that this was easier than was it truly.

It was a can of worms.

Jim barely had to bend, and Joyce simply had to stretch her swanlike

neck, and close her eyes - to hell with Flo or Callahan or any of them if they walked in, neither were parting this time - as Jim Hopper kissed her for the first time in twenty years (for it was most certainly Jim who closed the space, but Joyce was waiting, willing for it to happen.)

The kiss lasted long enough for Joyce to loop her arms around Jim's neck, fingers threading into the hair that touched his collar. It was long enough for Jim to spread a hand onto the desk, leaning his weight on it as he tried to get closer to her, the other hand grasping her hip, as her knees bumped against his thighs. It was sweet, their lips only ever so slightly wet as they pressed - pressed, and then their mouths slanted across, lips pulling. Joyce's bottom lip went between his, and Jim's tongue slid against it but for a moment before Joyce's lips parted, and he held her jaw as their tongues met, and slowly, briefly moved together.

Joyce gasped softly when they parted, the space between them only centimetres, electric little jolts of arousal spearing through her tummy, down, and out. She heard Hopper's breath stutter as the big hand that held her face stroked down her neck, across her clavicle, the side of her breast, all the way to grasp her hip again. She was suddenly very warm, and felt her neck burn as her pulse quickened. Joyce opened her eyes first, and felt a wave of emotion hit her.

She had not been this close to him in so long, and it was a kind of detail that took her breath away. Joyce did not believe she ever really knew what his nose looked like before now - in his office before noon, after age forty - and she bumped her own against it, so suddenly fond of it, and him, was she.

Jim smoothed a thumb along her cheekbone, his eyes opening only slightly to watch her. Jim thought well-kissed was Joyce at her most beautiful, and he felt a tingly pride at how the skin around her mouth was pink from his ministrations. Her lips parted as she regained her breath, and all he could think about was kissing her again. She was soft, and warm, and his whole body pulsed with want for her - Though so too was he just overcome with such fuckin' feeling.

He never thought there was a chance in hell he would get to kiss her again, and it was enough to make his head swim, his uniform pants

tighten. The deliciously crackling tension was the same as when they were pretty young things, but damn, it was better, too - Kissing her meant everything back then, and it meant everything now - But everything was different after a lifetime apart, it was more.

He smiled, then, lips spreading wide, and he kissed her cupid's bow, whilst his thumb ran along that bottom lip (the one she bit all the time, through nerves and playfulness, and if she knew it killed him, she didn't care).

Hopper pressed warm little kisses against her mouth, his mustache tickled against her skin, his fingers calloused and warm, and Joyce felt her eyes water - It seemed impossible they were here, but it also made so much sense that it scared Joyce. It made so much sense that it was enough for her to briefly question what her entire fucking life had been without him, and it was heady, it was moving.

"Jim," Joyce breathed, as they pulled back, and he straightened up, one hand still cupping her face, the other low on her back.

She clutched her hands at his collar, wanting him close. Oh. She might cry now, she realized, as she pressed her lips together, savouring the sensations leftover from his kisses.

She felt the sting of emotion in her nose, in the back of her throat, and she took a shaky breath that could have been a sob.

"Joy," His long, thick fingers stroked from her hairline to chin, and her dark lashes covered the tears that leaked out of the corner of her eyes as she looked down. "Y'okay?"

Joyce met his eyes, and Jim's fingers leaped to smooth away the tears that formed.

"Mmmhmm." She nodded, a bit surprised at how the painfully erotic want between them had shifted to this tender, emotional thing.

Surprised, but she took it all in - This was always something real between them, always something more than just good sex, but more than just platonic care - They had always been entwined, took up room within the other, and it was majorly comforting to feel that

again. Some part of Joyce knew there would forever be more to her and Jim, some part of her knew everything he had thought in the two years since she walked into this office - Because she had thought the same things, had battled the same fears, and desires.

Two halves of a whole, as entirely, soppingly sappy as it was.

"If that was stupid, tell me, I didn't wanna...push, I didn't,-"

"No," Joyce's voice was small, shy, and Hopper's breath stuck in his throat, making it feel raw. She wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, drawing him down to her again, pressing her forehead against his even as he had to bend awkwardly to allow it. "Not stupid. It was good, Hop. I've missed being close to you."

Jim would never be able to explain the clenching, fiery hope that burned through his gut at her words, but it was really all over for him. There wouldn't - Couldn't be anyone else. She always drew him in like this - Deeply, expansively.

Everywhere he looked there was she, and of course - Of course. It was stupid (but necessary!) not to tell her about Eleven sooner, stupid to lose that time with her - Maybe they could have spared Bob had they just figured out that their teenage feelings had gone no where.

Some younger, detached part of Jim thought it was stupid he had not asked her to come with him, again, after high school, thought it stupid he hadn't married her before Vietnam, hadn't stopped her from pushing him away. It was stupid he didn't show up on her wedding day to pummel Lonnie's face in, and take her away from all of that shit, for it was shit even then, even before she was officially a Byers.

The older, wiser part of Jim knew if there had been Joyce, there would have been no Sara, and he couldn't regret his path for that. He couldn't regret Diane - Younger than he, and blonder than Joyce - or the family she gave him, albeit briefly. But damn, if there was another lifetime where he could have both...

He supposed that was this lifetime. Huh. He couldn't save Joyce, or himself, all that heartache, all of that bullshit, and they might not get to enjoy each other at their youngest, peak selves, but - Dammit if he

wasn't going to make the most of it now.

Jim realized he was tightly grasping her hip amongst all of these thoughts, and he slowly pried his fingers off of the delicate curve. He wanted to feel her skin on his, wanted to remember the freckles across her stomach, to feel the warmth between her thighs, and the tears in her eyes were all that stopped him from spreading her out on his desk.

"I've waited a helluva long time to be this close to you again." Jim uttered, and found his voice a little hoarse, and this did nothing to abate Joyce's watery eyes.

She was not sure she could find any more words for this today.

"I gotta go, Hop," Joyce lifted herself off the desk, her front pressing against his chest briefly as she did so, and then she was on her feet, so petite beside him.

"Okay." Was all he said, because neither of them knew how to do this.

"You need a haircut." She smiled, straightening her coat, and Jim rubbed his hand against the back of his neck, where his hair touched his shirt collar.

"Haven't ya seen how the kids are wearing it these days?"

"Yeah, Hop, the kids..." The playfulness returned with ease, and Joyce felt relieved, felt reassured that this was gonna be easy - They had slipped right back in, and it felt so good to know this, and to know him.

"Careful now, Joycie," Jim warned with a grin. He didn't notice he was still touching her until she turned to leave, and his hand fell from her back.

"Oh, I am being careful, I haven't even started on Mr. Selleck there," Joyce wagged her fingers near his face, quite clearly referring to his carefully shaped, bushy mustache.

"When will I get to hear you start on that?"

"Soon enough, I imagine," She stood by the door, bag over her shoulder, and she couldn't stop herself from smiling, the motion tingling her tender lips. "Walk me out?"

"Of course." Jim kept his distance across the room until she asked, uncertain how she might be feeling, but he was at her side in a stride, maybe two.

His hand fell to hover at the small of her back as they exited his office, and turned toward the front door. Jim stopped near Flo's window, and Joyce smiled coquettishly over her shoulder, as Jim lifted his hand in a goodbye. She was biting that goddamn lip again on her way out the door.

Jim tugged a hand over his face, grasping his chin as he watched her go.

He felt Flo's eyes on him, and Powell kept glancing over, too. The office was mostly empty but for them.

"Joyce gone for the day?" Flo inquired, and her tone was polite, if not a little condescending.

Powell seemed to be listening. Seemed as good of a time as any...

"Clearly, yeah - And hey, you know, there won't be anymore - Anymore nothin' about Joyce, okay?" Jim put his hands on his hips as he turned toward them, not sounding quite as confident in the statement as he intended.

He didn't want to blankly state what was going on between them, though Flo had seen enough to connect the dots - And he knew Joyce didn't need him stepping up to bat for her, but he himself didn't wanna hear any of the shit they used to say about her - Didn't want to hear it then, didn't wanna hear it now.

"What d'ya mean, Chief?" Powell asked in a tone that suggested he knew exactly what Jim meant.

"No more comments, no more disrespect." His voice was loud and clear, but not ranting - He didn't want to lose his cool and give them satisfaction of knowing that Joyce could rile him up so - That he

puffed up with the instinct to protect her.

"Chief, no one has said anything like that about Joyce in quite some time." Flo reminded reasonably, and Jim knew none of the things she said in the past were with ill-intent. More that Flo just wanted peace and quiet, and none of them really let her have it - Especially when Will was missing, especially when Joyce called after him several times a day when Will was possessed - But Jim understood Joyce's side of it above anyone else's.

It infuriated him beyond belief that everyone regarded her so harshly in the light of her divorce - That Joyce's kids were still called Lonnie Byers' boys - That Joyce was still Lonnie Byers' ex - As if anything Lonnie did in this town was worth a damn - As if he didn't have more than he deserved the years he was married to Joyce.

Jim didn't know what it was - Maybe that Lonnie's own father was well-liked, and that was handed down to Lonnie, unearned - Maybe that Lonnie was always a good time, fun and charming, personable and creative at his absolute best, but a lying, conniving, thieving, cheat at his worst. A drunk, an abusive husband (it made Jim's stomach churn to think of that weasel laying his hands on Joyce), an absentee father - And fucking Joyce was the one labelled the failure in their marriage? The one called crazy for having fucking anxiety over the shitstorm Lonnie made of her life, and left her with?

Nah, it didn't fly with Jim, and it never had - He was always sure to correct anyone who said a bad thing about her, sometimes calmly, other times not so calm - Even back when he might have thought bad things about her himself, after their breakup.

One thing he never thought her was crazy.

"Good, and they never should have,-" Jim made to turn back to the office, but Powell threw in another comment.

"Even you thought she was,-"

"What, Powell? What? I thought she was an anxious Mother whose son was missing, and then sick, and went to the end of the world to help him. I've never said a bad word about Joyce, even at my most

goddamn annoyed, alright?"

"We get it, Hop." Flo assured, casting a glance in Powell's direction.

"There's no option not to get it." Jim huffed, and it was the end of his involvement in the conversation. He hoped the stern glare he offered before retreating to the office was enough to prevent any further discussion between Flo and Powell.

Jim threw all chances of discretion out the window with that exchange, but hell, it was worth it.

I didn't plan on posting this so abruptly, there was another part I wanted to write & add in, but Y'KNOWWWW - Since season three won't be out until fucking July, I have some time to drag this out lmao. It ends suddenly because it wasn't my plan to post, but it's late, and I've been working on this, and why not get a 'lil Jopper content out there. Seriously - I have to live a whole life before July, this is unbearable.

Thank you for all of the kind comments on the last chapter, and any chapters, and the story in general. It is nice to have somewhere to put my energy through my winter SAD. Thank you for continuing to write your own Jopper stories, too.

12. ever since

this was a weird chapter that i struggled to write - i wanted to scrap it a few times, but weird content is better than none, maybe? lol. i intended to pick it up again after the ~flashback, but it seemed a natural place to end it. and it is still only February. i am someone who, in fanfic, likes to write relatively close to canon. i am not good at writing entire plots on my own, so i just like to circle back to these things & expand on them - the things we know, but didn't see. like, the dog died - here, i killed him & insinuated Jopper fluff all in one! lol.

thank you for the kind reviews & observations y'all give to me - thank you dearly.

The dog died in the Spring of '84. It was almost exactly a year to the day, Joyce recalled, as she left the station after her rendezvous with Jim. Rendezvous. What a scandalous thought was that, compared to how achingly intimate of a moment it felt.

She removed her coat as soon as she was out the door, feeling vaguely suffocated by the leather. The skin on her neck was warm, and tingling. The walk back to the car across the street was short, and she stopped herself from looking back to the station several times, wondering if he was watching her from the window, or if she imagined the weight of his gaze.

Joyce glanced at herself in the flip down mirror once in the car, and noted her skin was pink and blotchy - As sometimes would happen through nerves or stress. She pressed her hand against the car window, cooling it, and then against her skin, taking a deep breath.

Not that being with Jim made her...nervous or stressed, but her heart raced, and blood pumped, for it was so delicate compared to the hostile ground they started on when he first moved back to Hawkins. It was so blatant, so raw - She left feeling a little exposed, a little more vulnerable. Being close to him was calming, reassuring, but it was overwhelming in the same way. The fact she could be so close to him again, that she had...she had him again - Jesus, Jesus - It made

her limbs shake with all of the possibility it held.

In Jim Hopper she had a past, a present, and the notion of a future suddenly seemed very real. Joyce felt, if not wholly certain, at least nearly there in believing that this was how it was supposed to be. Bob was a wound she would carry, but...her boys were okay, Will had overcome and survived twice, El was alive, and that was - That was her purpose, her existence - That was it, that was everything - And Jim had been there. That was everything, too.

It was okay to know that, it was okay to cherish the sweet, easy days with Bob, but understand it wasn't anything like what she had with Hopper - A hundred years ago, or now. Through it all, he was at her side. He slept in his Blazer in her driveway more than once during, and after, Will's disappearance. He was gentle and understanding with her in some ways, though demanding and impatient in others - But Joyce only thought of it all with fondness.

Even if it was uncomfortable, even if it was awkward, tense in the beginning - How he tried to brush her off when he found her in his office the morning Will went missing, fed-up before she had even opened her mouth. Lobbing quips about screwing Chrissy Carpenter, of all goddamn things...

He was still there, though he faltered, and so did she - They said things, they shouted - But the trust built, the respect grew, and she found herself knowing Jim Hopper again in all the ways she had before. She found that she gravitated toward him, that as irritating as he could be - set in his ways, isolated, arrogant - so too was he utter strength, and comfort. Joyce believed she could be that for him, too - She believed that despite his strength, despite his broad shoulders on which she had laid all of her troubles, that he could use somewhere to lay his, too. Joyce wanted him to be as comfortable sharing with her as she was with him. She wanted him to know he didn't have to be alone in any of it - Raising El, worrying about Brenner, mourning Sara.

She felt unusually confident in her determination that she could be that for him - Her eyes watered when she thought of it - When she thought of Jim whispering to her about his worries, just like did she hers. Joyce wanted to give to him, wanted to give herself to him in

every which way, and she wanted to...wanted to be with him.

Jim Hopper was someone in whom Joyce once believed stood her future, her life, her chance out of Hawkins. She left pulsing, living, pieces of her soul behind in him through everything, and through the final blow when he went to Vietnam. Being around him again was like getting to be whole again, being reunited with her old hopes, dreams, and fears - The more time spent with Hopper, the more Joyce found of herself left behind in him.

Such Kismet that felt, such undeniable fate. Behind the grumpy, arrogant defense mechanisms there was still the Hop who held her hair back as she retched up the cheap vodka she shot at one of Benny's parties in senior year, the one who couldn't quite look her in the eye when he, only once, saw her face-to-face whilst pregnant with Jonathan.

Jim felt the same. He still knew Joyce, knew that so was she the same, despite the ways that the years had treated her - Had treated them. Her eyes were still bright and wide, and Jim would remember that he loved her as the wild-willed woman with whom he grew up - Chemistry, history, shared trauma...

Bob himself even knew this - Bob asked Jim to get Joyce and Will (and Mike) to safety, and that was because he knew Joyce and Jim were...intrinsically connected, and it was too blinding to witness directly. It was nearly embarrassing, so unawares were they, so devoted was Joyce to finding Jim, to holding him close when they saved him.

The writing had been on the wall long before either of them realized.

She was nervous with anticipation, keyed up and excited - None of it was bad, just - Just unbelievable, such uncharted territory as the damaged adults were they.

In all of the ways it was surprising, so was it unsurprising in just as many.

Jim was at her home before she was off work the day Chester died. It was a sad thing, an upsetting event, but it was something she could

have easily handled, especially after Will's trauma, after everything they had gone through the winter before. She was anxious by nature, but wasn't fragile - Joyce knew this about herself, Jim knew this - Her darling, smart boys knew this - She could handle a pet dying. But Jim was there because Will called him, and that was - That was something even then, wasn't it?

Her boys had so few male role models in life, and didn't extend trust very easily. Will trusted Hop, and Jonathan would grow to trust him. Will called the Chief of Police about their sick dog. Joyce was already seeing Bob by that time, though far from exclusive or serious, and Jim had found El months before, unbeknownst to Joyce.

Jim had been absent already, off the radar, and yet he showed up without question when her kid called him at the station. It was before Will had the worst of his episodes, but the nightmares, the coughing, had started long before, and would only increase in the coming months. The frenetic stress of what Will had experienced was never far from mind, and Joyce was on absolute edge at any change in his health, or behaviour.

She still didn't feel like she really had him back from the Upside Down, and it made sense now, knowing what had lurked inside of her youngest those long months.

April 84

Joyce pulled into the driveway - It was Friday night, and she worked until 9 - Arriving home some time later. The day had been warm, but the night was quickly cooling, and there was a misty fog swirling through. It was an April during which the days felt balmy, but the nights were still wintry - Joyce could see her breath, a stark contrast to going without a coat that afternoon.

The earth was saturated and mucky from days of rain, so there were deep tire tracks left in the driveway, as well as an extra vehicle she was not expecting. Jon's was there, and it wasn't Bob - He wouldn't be here without her, he had only been to the house twice, and waited on the porch.

Something felt off immediately, and Joyce's heart leaped to her

throat. A hot panic flowed through her, and she clenched her teeth as she breathed through her nose, steady.

Then came the sick weight in her stomach when she realized it was indeed the Chief of Police's Blazer.

Jim hadn't been around in weeks, and it made sense looking back - He was living in a cabin in the woods with El, and only visited the trailer to keep up appearances - He was struggling to raise a kid, keep it a secret, and keep them all outta danger.

And yet, Joyce was coming home to his vehicle on this night.

She barely had the Pinto in park, before she tore the keys from the ignition, and threw the door open. Her hands shook as she imagined all of the catastrophes that could have brought him here, when he seemed to be effectively distancing himself from them.

Hopper came out onto the porch before she could spiral too far, for and by which she was thankful and a little flustered - Why did she feel like something had changed in the weeks since they last spoke? She wondered if it was in this time that he heard she was seeing Bob, or maybe he was seeing someone himself, or maybe the whispers of Joyce and Jim during the weeks after they brought Will home were enough to make him pull back...

She didn't know, but something felt different. She didn't feel entirely at ease to see the bulk of him on her doorstep, didn't feel that warm comfort so much - She felt a little nervous, a little worried - Felt like there was a boundary between them again that had fallen during their search for Will.

It was silly, and maybe she was projecting her disappointment at his distance, so that things felt awkward, when they really weren't. Maybe it was just her, maybe he didn't find anything out of the ordinary. Maybe she was just too glad to see him, whatever the circumstance, and was not sure what that meant.

Joyce had the absurd thought to fix her hair before she was beside him on the step - He brought a confusing mix of worry and flirtation bubbling to her surface.

Right. Where were the kids? Why was he here? Worry, Joyce, panic, don't flirt.

Hopper had a cigarette in his mouth, and held a hand out to Joyce as if to try to halt her building panic. He instinctively knew she would be alarmed, nearly choking with anxiety, and knew how to get ahead of it - Soft voice, easy reassurance.

"Hey," He began as she came closer, old sneakers sliding through the smooth mud.

"The boys are okay." Jim said immediately, frowning with his own concern as he leaned down to grasp her arm to balance her as she struggled through the muck.

"What - What's going on, what happened? Why are you here? Will - Jonathan - Are,-" Joyce gripped his sleeve as she ascended the steps.

"Joyce, Joyce,-" He slid his hand to her elbow, trying to soothe her nerves, drawing her in close.

"-they okay, what happened?!" Joyce felt the impulse to shrug his hand off of her, but the splintered focus in her brain zeroed in on the concern for her boys, and why Jim was here, rather than what had driven him away.

"No, it's okay - They're safe, completely fine." He cocked his head toward his smoke as an offer, and she nodded, silently accepting it between tremulous fingers.

She puffed as he spoke.

"I dunno - If you're going to be upset, or how really to say it. I mean, it's,-" Jim, who normally could find words in a hard situation, was floundering.

Joyce bit her lip, frowning hard. She felt like things between them were completely thrown off, and the panic began to mount again, as his mouth moved wordlessly, brows raised high on his forehead, gesturing aimlessly with big hands.

"Hop," Joyce begged, her eyes wide, stamping her foot a little,

impatient and huffy, trying to centre his attention.

"The dog. The dog is sick. Will called me a couple of hours ago." Jim's brow crumpled, unsure of what reaction to expect. A sick pet was upsetting, but comparably it would be pretty standard for Byers levels of tragedy, and stress.

He knew Joyce was strong - among the strongest - and could handle it just fine, but he didn't really wanna say it just like that to the kid when he called. Will was concerned for the dog, concerned for his Mother - Jon wasn't yet home when Will called Hop - and as much as Hopper had on his plate, he had no intention of shutting any of the Byers down.

He didn't shake his head or roll his eyes at Will's concerned voice on the phone, and just told his officers he was leaving for the night without explanation, though it had been one of them to patch the call through, intrigued (nosy, in Jim's opinion) what Joyce Byers' youngest could want with the Chief.

Despite Joyce's concerns, the whispers of Joyce and Jim in the weeks after they saved Will were far from unpleasant, and sometimes thinking about her was the simplest pleasure of his day.

Jim still worried that maybe Will's disappearance and rescue, and losing El in such a scene (his guilt about that was another situation entirely), and everything Jonathan had shouldered those months back - He worried if Joyce might be more affected, might need more support than he realized - So he drove to the Byers house, and was prepared to do what he could to help with ole Chester - He owed them, he missed them.

Joyce could read none of this on his face, found she was too cloudy with anxiousness to know what he was possibly thinking at all. His words registered dimly through her panic, and she - Yeah, he said the dog, right?

"Oh Jesus," Joyce groaned, shaking her head, taking a long pull before handing the smoke back to Jim.

She was embarrassed they dragged him out over the dog. He had not

been around since they went to Chicago for Will's assessment - which was fine, he didn't have to be! - but they called him over because of the dog? He must think them helpless.

He was still in his uniform. Joyce had not seen him in anything but his uniform in quite some time, and it spoke of their interactions, now - Less casual, less personal, less intense since they saved Will from the Upside Down. She only saw him at the store, or in passing - Never after hours, never on his free time when he wore denim on long legs, strong thighs, flannel across broad shoulders. No.

"Sorry they bugged you about it." Joyce murmured, her gaze somewhere near his shoulder, teeth grazing her lower lip.

"I mean - Real sick, Joyce. I had to carry him in outta the rain, he was just laying there sort of convulsing," Jim took one last puff from the smoke, and Joyce couldn't help but wonder if maybe he did so because her mouth had just been on it, and where did that thought come from, considering she was seeing Bob, considering she was trying to respect whatever boundaries Jim needed, considering they were merely friends, considering -

"Oh," Joyce said, blanching a bit at this piece of information, as she watched him toss the butt, and he took a step away from her in the process, his hand falling from her arm.

She now noticed the smears of mud on his uniform, no doubt from hoisting the old dog into his arms. Her features pinched as she reached her hand toward him, touching it to his chest under the guise of brushing the dried mud from the material. Fondness burned low in her belly, clashing with the cold and bleak situation.

Hop.

He looked at her, gaze intense, as her fingertips lingered against his chest, and his own flexed as if he might touch her again. Fuck, he'd missed her. Fuck, she could help him so. He hated that El was home waiting for him - he had radioed her to inform what was going on - and he wished he could just go get her, and bring her to Joyce's welcoming doorstep.

"Yeah, I don't think - I don't think he's got too long." Jim winced himself, the whole exchange a bit awkward, a bit tense.

"Oh," Joyce bemoaned again, and then just felt terrible, felt tears sting her eyes as her panic calmed, her nerves dulled, but she still found herself shaky, and now a bit overwhelmed and sad. "Poor Chester."

"Yeah. Sorry." Hop said around a sigh, scrubbing a hand over his beard.

There was another conversation to be had, they both seemed to know - One that was not about her sick dog, one that shared details of her relationship status, of just where Hop had been - But it wasn't the time, and wouldn't be, unfortunately.

She was seeing Bob, and Jim was busy - Joyce wondered if he was drinking or taking pills again, but she was familiar with that look on Jim, and she wasn't getting that impression. He looked a little rumpled, eyes tired, circles dark, but not necessarily unhealthy. Just busy, maybe. Just living his own life, and that - That was fine.

"Why didn't Will call me? Jesus."

"Didn't wanna worry you if it was nothing, I guess." Hop shrugged, knowing it was quite true. Her boys valued her above anyone else, and Hopper got it - Because he did, too.

Joyce had to scoff a laugh at this. Her sweet, considerate boy.

"Didn't wanna worry his Mom the cashier, so called the police Chief over the sick damn dog." She smiled wryly, and Jim felt it in his teeth, felt it in the balls of his feet, how goddamn much it meant to see her smile.

"You're the most important person in the world to them - They wouldn't even think of it like that, y'know? I'm just some guy who happens to be a cop, you're their Mom. They're gonna worry about you first." Jim all but declared.

He felt that he couldn't hold her gaze for too long, sure that she knew he was hiding something, sure that it would not take much at all for

him to spill it to her, with the way her brunette waves fluttered around her face in the swirling, foggy air.

"They shouldn't have to worry about me at all." Joyce murmured back, figuring they should go inside before her boys wondered why she was more preoccupied with the Chief than Chester.

"Hey. I didn't mean it like that - I just meant, they,-" Jim began, but Joyce shook her head, trying to smile again.

"I know what you meant, Hop. I just wish...I just wish they didn't have to...carry so goddamn much." She had the urge to bury her face in her hands and just cry, because having him here again felt like such a release - Such a relief - She felt overwhelmed. She had things to deal with, but she wanted to stay standing here with him - goddamnit, Hop, where have you been, if I knew I could feel like this I wouldn't have...Bob...oh, Jesus her thoughts raced around.

"I wish you didn't have to carry so goddamn much. But if anyone has to do it - You and your boys are more than capable."

"Jesus, Hop. Where...where have you,-"

"You wanna come in and see him? Make a decision from there, maybe?" Jim cut her off, knowing that it felt like they were building to that - That they were heading for that topic of where have you been and he would just have to lie to her even more, so instead he steered them back to the present concern.

"Right. Yeah." Joyce nodded in agreement, and she began to fret over veterinarian expenses instead of Jim Hopper.

They entered the home, and Joyce was struck with the sight of Will on his stomach, stretched out on the floor beside Chester, his head lay on folded arms, just quietly observing. The light in the room was warm and dim, and she saw two mugs on the coffee table - Jim had made a coffee for each of them whilst waiting for her to come home. Her affection for him was almost enough to keep the stress at bay.

Jonathan emerged from the hall, and ushered Joyce a few feet away

while she removed her coat and work smock, as Hop knelt beside Will and ruffled the dog's fur, giving them a private moment.

Will relayed an update on the dog's condition to the Chief, and then Jim ruffled Will's hair, too, and Joyce felt the urge to cry again, and to ask him to smarten the fuck up, and not leave them again, and to dump Bob, and shit -

"I tried to tell him not to call Hopper." Jonathan mumbled, and Joyce gave him a side hug.

Jon looked uncomfortable, maybe, a little out of sorts with the police chief in their home during what Joyce herself considered a private, personal struggle with which to deal. They dealt with these things on their own, and as they came. It was hard to let someone else in, to expect someone else to understand their lives. Except - except when Will went missing, Joyce, Jonathan, and Jim dealt with that together, and that was it, wasn't it?

Jonathan felt like he had to be the man of the house, Joyce knew, and hated that he felt like that. Hated that Lonnie had been no such thing, and that her boys had to grow up so quick, Jonathan in particular. She knew he felt like he had to protect them, and her heart soared for her eldest, brooding and caring, and skeptical.

"It's okay. Are you okay with it?" She fixed the tag on his shirt, furrowed her brow in maternal concern.

"It's whatever, I just didn't see how he'd help." Jonathan shrugged, rubbed his neck, frowning.

"I know. We deal with this stuff us three, yeah? We could handle it. But it's not a bad thing if your brother feels like he can,-"

"What? Rely on him?"

"Maybe, yeah. I've known Hop my whole life, Jon, he's...this is his character, okay? It's okay if Will is comfortable enough to ask him for help. You don't have to - I don't even have to - But he came because Will called. Not a bad thing, honey - We don't have to do everything alone, you or me." It was the kind of conversation she expected to

have with him about Bob, eventually - Let him in, don't be so stubbornly strong, and Joyce bit her lip at the reminder she was saying this about Hop.

"Okay, Mom."

Hop told them in quiet tones, as the three Byers huddled around the pet on the floor, stroking his fur, that he didn't think the animal was suffering, he didn't seem to be in any pain, and "shit, Joyce, if we can save you a vet's bill...if it's not too much to deal with, we could just let him slip away."

Joyce looked at Hopper, crouched behind the family, observing them with quiet support, and consideration, and she wasn't sure. She thought, maybe, it was too much. She felt her chin quake with emotion she had held back since she arrived home, and Jim reached a hand out to her shoulder.

Joyce turned back to the dog and her boys, Jim squeezing her reassuringly, and she placed her own hand over top his, clinging to his touch.

"I'll stay, Joyce, we'll make sure it's real peaceful."

Hop had only excused himself once, about an hour after Joyce got home, to go to the Blazer to use the radio.

In the end, Chester went naturally, comfortable in his own dog bed, just after Joyce had convinced the boys to go to sleep, with a promise that she and Hop would keep an eye on him, and not leave him alone.

Joyce decided, as Hopper wrapped Chester up snug and secure in his favourite blanket, stroking his nose as he did so, that she was gonna give Hop whatever leeway he needed. She was going to live her life, and she was gonna miss him while he was living his, but she wouldn't resent him.

She didn't believe it was for shallow reasons that he was absent - Didn't believe he would ever leave them high and dry when it really

mattered, as this night was evidence of that. She figured whatever it was - it was because he knew they were okay. She knew that he would be back when he could - And he would tell her when he could, if he could.

It all settled over her real easy, real gentle, a few tears trailing down her face at the loss of Chester, and she didn't bug Hopper anymore that night about where he had disappeared to, or what he was mixed up in. The tension eased, a delicate acceptance settling in Joyce's chest, as Hopper sat next to her on the couch, a weary groan escaping his throat.

They finished their coffees, and Jim asked her more about Chester - When did they get him (eleven years ago), which boy loved him most (Will), and Joyce told him that Chester had always hated Lonnie, even bit him once, which earned a laugh from Jim.

Jim told her he loved dogs, wanted to get another one himself, soon, when he could - He didn't have a dog with Diane and Sara in the city, but now he was back to small town living, it was one thing he wanted again.

Joyce thought it was good to hear him making plans, to hear him wanting anything at all, when for so long he was...he was so far down. It made her sad to reflect on, so instead she just leaned against his side, broad and warm, and he settled an arm around her shoulder, a gesture of quiet comfort, Joyce reminded herself, and Jim did, too.

They fell asleep like that, sitting up, Jim's arm heavy and grounding around her, in the warmly lit living room. There was little time to question it when the rising sun woke them, as the boys were up and about to say their last goodbyes to the pet.

Bob Newby turned his car around that morning, before he could be detected by the Byers, or the Chief, as he pulled up to witness Jim digging what would be Chester's final resting place, and that was something about which Joyce never knew.